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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES IN EARLY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL WRITTEN EXPRESSION: TEACHER BELIEFS, INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES AND DECISION MAKING

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Lisa Cottrell Hickman Little

College of Educational and Behavioral Sciences
Department of School Psychology

May 2015

This Dissertation by: Lisa Cottrell Hickman Little

Entitled: *Instructional Practices in Early Elementary School Written Expression: Teacher Beliefs, Instructional Strategies and Decision Making*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in College of Education and Behavioral Science in Department of School Psychology

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The BIGGEST thank you to all of my supporters throughout this grad school journey! Thank you to my parents, my husband, and all of my family and friends! I'm so grateful for all of your encouragement and kind words. I never could have completed this without all of you!

ABSTRACT

Little, Lisa Cottrell Hickman. *Instructional Practices in Early Elementary School Written Expression: Teacher Beliefs, Instructional Strategies and Decision Making*. Published Doctor of Philosophy dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 2015.

This dissertation focuses on the experience of teaching from the perspective of seven early elementary school teachers instructing written expression. These experiences are examined through a phenomenological approach with a constructivist framework. Each participant completed two audio recorded semi-structured interviews and one classroom observation. Four major themes emerged from the transcripts, observations and artifacts gathered. The teachers reported primarily learning to instruct written expression through personal experience and the experience of colleagues, rather than from teacher training programs. Through this research, teachers described reliance on training while already working as elementary school educators and reliance on same grade-level colleagues to improve their own skills in instructing written expression. Additionally, some participants reported not realizing the limited knowledge that they had regarding written expression until they were already teachers. Furthermore, the participants indicated reliance on cues from their own students to determine the knowledge students have instead of using objective, research based tools. A common thread among teachers was a lack of confidence in teaching writing, which was related to many of the themes developed through the data. Written expression skills are important for early elementary school students in order for them to be able to express themselves,

communicate with others, and demonstrate their knowledge in a variety of academic subjects.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> American education will never realize its potential as an engine of opportunity and economic growth until a writing revolution puts language and communication in their proper place in the classroom. Writing is how students connect the dots in their knowledge. (National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, 2003, pp. 3)

When individuals are able to write successfully they can communicate knowledge, build new knowledge, share ideas, persuade others, remember information better, organize information, and express themselves creatively (Graham & Harris, 2005; Graham, MacArthur, & Fitzgerald, 2007; Risher, 2006; Robinson & Howell, 2008). Each of these skills allows people to successfully complete tasks in multiple roles throughout life. For the purpose of this study written expression will be defined as communication that is goal directed in nature through which an individual assigns words to independent thoughts in order to express one's self (Dixon, Isaacson, Stein, & Bartos, 2011; Dyson, 1991; Robinson & Howell, 2008). American school children all too often lack proficient written expression skills and are therefore unable to be successfully complete written expression tasks. Students accepted to the most prestigious universities are the most prepared for college level work, but about 75% of students enrolling in 2-year colleges are not prepared for college level math and English courses (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2010). The lessons completed during classroom

instruction impact students' abilities to build written expression skills. Through the current study, I will be able to examine one factor in development of student written expression achievement, which are the instructional decisions made by teachers teaching this subject.

Importance of Written Expression Instruction

Despite the knowledge base regarding the relationship between well-developed written expression skills and student success with all academic subjects, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation places little emphasis on written expression (Graham & Harris, 2005). In fact, NCLB requires school districts and states to monitor student progress on a regular basis in reading and math, but does not require the same frequency of assessment for written expression (United States Department of Education, 2002). Furthermore, the United States Department of Education (2002) reports that national writing assessment will be completed if time and money are available, rather than on a consistent scheduled basis. This testing would then be completed through the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessment system. In order to improve student success in all academic areas, The National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges (2006) calls for written expression reform at all grade levels. They report that students are consistently lacking the required skills to be considered proficient in written expression, which impacts skills development in other subjects. Written expression is imbedded in all aspects of life (National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, 2003). Despite the importance of written expression skill development, the majority of students are lacking important skills. In addition, without these skills, students are unable to participate fully in several aspects of

life, both during and following formal education. The reason for limited student skills is undetermined at this time.

To work toward improved student achievement, teachers report using many different instructional strategies in the classroom, both strategies with and without empirical evidence (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). For this purposes of the current study, the focus will be on the strategies used to teach written expression, rather than the content taught during such lessons. Best practices in education would include using strategies with empirical support, but teachers often times struggle to use these strategies for a variety of reasons. Additionally, teachers are expected to convey the importance of written expression to students, which is a more manageable task if teachers are proficient writers themselves (National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools and Colleges, 2006). Teaching children to enjoy written expression and to build self-confidence through written expression provides students with a lifelong creative outlet (National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, 2003). Many children fail to find enjoyment in the art of written expression because they become overwhelmed with the mechanics of the task. Unlike other creative outlets students are exposed to throughout education, the ability to write is also essential for lifelong success.

Challenges to Written Expression Instruction

Limited student skills. Throughout the United States, nearly 75% of eighth and twelfth grade students lack the written expression skills to be considered proficient on the NAEP (United States Department of Education, 2011). In order to be considered proficient on this assessment, students must demonstrate competency throughout a variety of written expression tasks. For the purposes of this assessment, written

expression was defined as, “A complex, multifaceted, and purposeful act of communication that is accomplished in a variety of environments, under various constraints of time, and with a variety of language resources and technological tools” (United States Department of Education, 2011, p. 4). This assessment included more skills related to the use of technology for written expression purposes than previous administrations. Students completing this assessment were required to use written expression to persuade other’s, write to explain information to increase the reader’s knowledge, and write to convey an experience to communicate with others. Additionally, student written expression was scored based on development of ideas, organization of ideas and language facility, and conventions. This illustrates the variety of written expression skills students are expected to have in order to be successful writers in all areas of life. Based on students’ performance at eighth and twelfth grades, it is likely that students also lacked proficient written expression skills throughout elementary school. “At its best, writing is learning” (National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003, p. 13). Students who are unable to write well may ultimately struggle to use written expression to further their own education. This data indicates that students are lacking many important written expression skills and the cause of this must be explored in order to improve proficiency in the future.

Tracking student progress and data. In addition to the challenges of assisting students in becoming proficient writers, limited data is available to track the progress of students on a state and national level. While the United States Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics provides national data, the data are only available for limited grades, eighth and twelfth in the most recent years the report has

been published. This assessment is not completed each year, and is not completed according to a consistent schedule. In 2011 the written expression portion of the NAEP was computerized for the first time and it was completed by 24,100 eighth grade students and 28,100 twelfth grade students. Additionally, some states provide student written expression data at multiple grade levels, while others do not. The data from this assessment appears to be consistent with data of college students. Over 50% of first-year college students do not have the ability to produce papers with only limited written expression errors (National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, 2003).

Additionally, the expectations for written expression proficiency in each state are not necessarily consistent with one another, and they are also potentially different from the standards of the NAEP. The Common Core Standards Initiative has attempted to increase the consistency among states regarding the information to be taught; however, these standards may be interpreted differently and taught using different instructional practices (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012). Therefore, simply tracking student skills and progress is challenging on multiple levels. Furthermore, the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges (2003) reports that American students will not be able to compete internationally with other students until written expression education is given more attention and student skills improve. Comparing American students to other students internationally is challenging because of the variability in instructional practices data reporting.

Written Expression Skills in Colorado

Due to the previously mentioned reasons, written expression data is best understood by examining data from each state individually. Throughout the state of Colorado, variability exists in student written expression achievement at all grade levels. All data are reported in 2012from the Colorado Department of Education. In Weld County School District 6 (Greeley and Evans, Colorado), 43.65% of all elementary school students are considered to have at least proficient written expression skills on the Transitional Colorado Assessment Program in 2012. The state of Colorado considers this district to be "Approaching" statewide written expression skill expectations. In the Saint Vrain Valley RE 1J School District (Longmont, Colorado area) 58.04% of elementary school students' demonstrated at least proficient written expression skills on the same assessment, and the state has deemed this district to "Meet" statewide expectations. Additionally, elementary school students in the Cherry Creek 5 school district (Denver, Colorado area) were reported by the state of Colorado to "Meet" statewide written expression expectations, with 64.61% of students at or above the proficient level in written expression skills on the same assessment. Another school district in the Denver area (Adams County 14) was reported as "Does Not Meet" statewide expectations in written expression, with 32.45% of students performing in the proficient or above category in written expression skills. In the Pueblo City 60 school district (Pueblo, Colorado) 49.72% of students' demonstrated proficient or above skills on the same assessment in 2012. This is considered by the state of Colorado to be "Approaching" state expectations. Based on these statistics, a school can be considered to meet state standards when nearly half of the students still lack proficient written expression skills.

Barriers to Written Expression Instruction

Inconsistent written expression expectations. Nationally, the general population agrees conceptually that the climate of American schools and communities must support students as writers; however, based on current legislation, it is unclear if American policymakers are choosing to place emphasis on written expression (National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges, 2006). National measures have been taken to increase consistency in regards to written expression instruction. For example, The English Language Arts Standards Project (1996) was undertaken to create consistent national standards for written expression education. More recently, the Common Core Standards Initiative has developed standards for many subject areas, including written expression, which have been adopted by 45 states (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012). Despite these and similar efforts, little is known about what actually takes place during written expression instruction in American elementary school classrooms (National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools and Colleges, 2006). Without knowledge of typical classroom activities, proposing and implementing meaningful change is a significant challenge.

The inconsistency regarding how to include information in written expression lessons, the instructional practices to be used, and the importance of written expression may in part be attributed to the multiple demands on teachers' time and attention throughout each school day. In order to improve written expression education, Graham and Harris (2005) report that developing a comprehensive national written expression policy including identification of effective instructional strategies for teaching this subject. Furthermore, Graham and Harris report that improving the quality of written

expression instruction would allow special education professionals to more easily differentiate between students with written expression disabilities and those without.

Teacher Beliefs and Knowledge Regarding Written Expression

Pre-service teacher perspectives. One likely factor that influences the written expression instruction is the teacher's personal biases regarding written expression instruction (Hall & Grisham-Brown, 2011). Pre-service teachers have a unique perspective on teaching written expression because they are still enrolled in teacher training programs. Hall and Grisham-Brown (2011) explored the positive and negative writing experiences of pre-service teachers, finding that personal experiences potentially impact the written expression lessons that pre-service teachers will choose to teach professionally. This carry over is also likely because many teachers do not receive specific training during teacher education programs on written expression instruction (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). If teachers have not been trained to specifically teach written expression, they may draw from personal experiences to determine what to teach and how to best teach (Vartuli, 2005), rather than using empirically supported teaching strategies and lessons. Teachers' personal experiences as students do not necessarily lead to use of the most appropriate teaching strategies.

Barnyak and Paquette (2010) reported that pre-service elementary school teachers must examine personal perspectives of the subject area prior to teaching. This is important because personal experiences impact the teaching methods chosen (Vartuli, 2005), even though these pre-service teachers have learned empirically supported teaching strategies. Additionally, a teacher's positive or negative experiences with written expression on a personal level may impact the use of written expression instruction for

students in that teacher's classroom (Morgan, 2010). Students in classrooms with teachers possessing limited training may not gain the necessary skills to become proficient writers, reducing the ability to use writing as a tool for academic success. Teachers' personal writing experiences appear to shape beliefs about writing instruction (Hall & Grisham-Brown, 2011; Morgan, 2010). Teachers may choose to rely on these personal biases more often in written expression instruction because many teachers report receiving inadequate training to instruct written expression (Gilbert & Graham, 2010).

Challenge of instructing multiple subjects. Unlike teachers in the upper grades, elementary school teachers are required to instruct all subjects, regardless of formal training or personal preferences (Wilkins, 2010). Risher (2006) conducted a small scale qualitative study regarding written expression instruction and the participants reported a belief that teaching written expression successfully is a complex task. Additionally, participants described this task as dissimilar from all other subjects the teachers were responsible for instructing. Risher further states that teachers face a challenge in assisting students in becoming independent writers, not simply competent writers. Wilkins (2010) reported that on average, teachers in lower elementary school preferred teaching written expression more compared to upper elementary teachers; however, written expression was consistently reported to be one of all elementary school teachers' least favorite subjects to teach. Teachers with high-self efficacy more often reflect a sense of confidence to students in student ability, compared to teachers with low self-efficacy (Vartuli, 2005). Teachers' personal preference against teaching written expression could be a barrier to assisting students in becoming proficient writers.

The grade level a teacher instructs is a predictor of classroom practices; however, even after controlling for grade level and education, teacher beliefs was found to be the strongest predictor of classroom practices (Maxwell, McWilliam, Hemmeter, Ault, & Schuster, 2001). Vartuli (2005) states that, "beliefs are formed from personal experiences, education, and values" (p.76). She further states that although teachers may not be consciously aware of personal beliefs, beliefs impact judgments and decisions made by teachers. Maxwell et al., (2001) assessed the factors that impact developmentally appropriate classroom instruction. They found that three factors accounted for nearly half of the variance in classroom practices, including classroom characteristics, teacher characteristics, and teacher beliefs (Maxwell et al., 2001). Additionally, Vartuli reports that teachers' instructional practices and curricular decisions are influenced by teaching philosophy, teaching theory, and personal belief systems.

Student teacher relationship in written expression. Because written expression is a highly social activity, the perspectives that students bring in to written expression lessons impact the experience of the entire class. Student self-confidence can impact preference for certain academic subjects and impact the effort students are willing to put forth academically (Pajares, 1996). Teachers' self-efficacy is described as, "their perceptions about their own capabilities to foster students' learning and engagement" (p. 154, Shaughnessy 2004). Shaughnessy (2004) suggests that teacher self-efficacy is developed based on personal experiences and teacher self-efficacy can impact student self-efficacy, indicating a reciprocal relationship between teachers and students. Additionally, students must experience success in written expression if they are to maintain or build self-efficacy, and students must internally perceive themselves as

successful for the experience to truly raise self-confidence (Parajas, Johnson, & Usher, 2007). The behaviors and attitudes of both students and teachers during written expression lessons likely impact one another (Shaughnessy, 2004), which mold each written expression lesson in to a unique experience for all involved. A clear need for written expression reform has arisen; however, students must believe that written expression will be useful if it is to be fully incorporated in to their lives.

Lack of teacher training. In many cases, a preference to not teach written expression is combined with a lack of training on how to teach written expression. Teaching written expression can be rather challenging for teachers because many were not specifically taught how to instruct this subject during teacher training programs (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). Gilbert and Graham (2010) found that most participants reported receiving adequate training in instructing written expression only after completing teacher training programs, typically during in-service programs. This lack of training occurs in part because not all states require specific written expression instruction coursework during teacher education programs (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). Inconsistency in written expression instruction throughout teacher training programs may cause challenges for schools and students later in teachers' careers when school administrators may expect that all teachers have equivalent training. The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges (2003) states that all prospective teachers should be required to take instructional written expression courses in order to gain an understanding of the purpose and enjoyment of written expression. This is to benefit pre-service teachers personally and to benefit future students. The commission further reports that if teachers are to be responsible for instructing written

expression, they must be provided with assistance and training to complete this endeavor. Additionally, the commission states that these teachers must have the opportunity to hone individual written expression skills and personally experience the power of writing successfully.

Need for Increased Focus on Written Expression

Variability in student skills. Students enter school with a wide range of academic skills, including written expression skills, and teachers must be prepared to teach students of many different skill levels (National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, 2003). In order for students to have well developed written expression skills children must be taught to write things accurately, write using appropriate mechanics, and write in a way that makes sense to others (National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, 2003). Because education is available to a diverse population of students, the methods of teaching must be flexible to match the population and its needs. However, based on current students' performance, the diverse learning needs of all students are likely not met.

Written expression across the curriculum. The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges (2003) suggests that at all grade levels, written expression components should be included in every curricular area to ensure that students are learning to use different written expression styles and to write for a variety of audiences. State-by-state written expression standards may not be interpreted consistently with one another, causing widespread differences in the information taught to students throughout the United States. Common Core Standards have been adopted by most states to guide writing instruction (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012). School

districts are able to interpret these standards and determine how to teach the information (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012). The Common Core Standards detail the information to be taught during written expression instruction, but it does not explain effective instructional methods for teaching this information. This inconsistency in teaching methods is visible in results of high stakes statewide testing and national testing of written expression skills. Additionally, the commission reports that in order for students to be successful in education and throughout life, they must be able to "think, reason, and communicate" (The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, 2003, p.9), rather than simply able to memorize facts. This type of knowledge is not always assessed on high stakes assessments.

Conceptual Underpinnings of the Study

Albert Bandura (1986) states that human behavior is learned by observation and interaction with others in the environment. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory has been widely applied in education, including to the instruction of written expression at all grade levels. Classroom activities incorporating Social Cognitive Theory include peer editing and student lead lessons, among other things. By using this theory to teach written expression in the classroom students, teachers, and the environment can impact one another. This allows students to learn from multiple "teachers", including the natural world around them, peers, and the teacher. In addition, students are able to draw from the ideas of others to find creative topics, to learn new vocabulary words, and to try new writing structure. In addition, students are able to avoid repeating the mistakes of peers by observing peers' written expression and revision processes (Hamilton & Ghatala, 1994). Although Social Cognitive Theory has been demonstrated in the literature to be an

effective method to teach children to become proficient writers, the principles are often times not used in classrooms due to time constraints and the requirements of high stakes testing.

Statement of the Problem

Nationally, limited information is available regarding what actually takes place during written expression instruction in classrooms (National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools and Colleges, 2006), which makes it difficult to determine which aspects instruction are not successful. In addition most pre-service teachers do not receive training regarding what to teach during written expression instruction (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). This lack of training has the potential to lead to inconsistencies regarding how information is taught between different schools and states, leading to varying levels of knowledge among students. Hall and Grisham-Brown (2011) report that teachers likely rely on personal opinions of what to include in lessons when they have not received explicit instruction themselves on instructing this subject. Additionally, teacher personal beliefs often impact teacher instructional decision making (Maxwell et al., 2001; Morgan, 2010; Vartuli, 2005), and therefore, the instructional decision making process must be understood. The result of these challenges to successful written expression instruction is that most students nationally lack necessary written expression skills to be considered proficient (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). In order to ensure that students are provided with similar opportunities to learn new information, the methods used to teach written expression must be explored.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to explore teachers' instructional decision making practices and perspectives of written expression instruction. Data has been gathered on effective teaching strategies to be used during written expression instruction, but it is difficult to determine if these practices are actually used in classrooms. While many different factors could potentially impact students' ability to demonstrate well develop written expression skills (i.e., curricula, peer influence, assessment methods), the current study will focus on the instructional methods and strategies used by teachers, the thought process influencing teachers' instructional decisions, and exploring the foundational knowledge guiding teachers' instructional decision making processes. Additionally, many teachers are struggling to determine the most effective ways to include written expression across the curriculum. On a large scale, the data from this study can then be used to assist teachers in making the task of teaching written expression less burdensome by better understanding common classroom practices, understand the challenges teachers report experiencing during written expression instruction, and explore the successful aspects of written expression instruction.

Research Questions

The research questions used in this study were designed to provide information for educational professionals regarding the strategies used to teach early elementary school children how to become successful writers. Two primary research questions were examined in this study:

Q1 What is the foundational decision making system for teacher's decisions in selecting instructional content and strategies for beginning writing?

Q2 What thought process guides teachers in selecting content and the different methods and strategies used during written expression lessons?

Summary

Throughout this chapter I have described the need for the present study and the gap in research that this study will assist in filling. The importance of written expression instruction, the challenges faced by teachers in completing written expression instruction, difficulties in monitoring written expression data, lack of student skills, the impact of teacher beliefs regarding written expression, and the need for an increased focus on written expression have all been described in the current chapter. Additionally, this information has led to the development of the two previously stated research questions. By answering these questions, I will be able to better understand written expression instruction in early elementary school classrooms.

Delimitations

The data to be collected in this study will be gathered from small school districts in Colorado. Only teachers who primarily teach kindergarten through second-grade students in general education will be included in the study. Additionally, these potential participants must also have a class period devoted to written expression instruction that is above and beyond instruction for other subjects and is not embedded in to another academic subject. Classroom teachers will be the focus of this study because they are most directly responsible for classroom instruction. This study will be limited to the lived experiences and perceptions of classroom teachers. School based professionals working in other capacities will not be included in this study. Additionally, teachers primarily responsible for students in third grade and above will not be included due to the potential

differences in the academic expectations of younger elementary school students compared to older elementary school students.

Limitations

All participants will be gathered from small school districts throughout the Front Range and Eastern Plains of Colorado. Additionally, some schools may have rather prescribed lessons compared to the teachers who will participate in this study. Due to the limited range of the sample and the range of instructional decision making opportunities teachers have, the findings may not be generalizable to all kindergarten through second-grade teachers throughout the United States.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The previous chapter outlined the purpose and rationale of the current study. Chapter II details the recent research regarding written expression instruction, teacher perceptions of written expression, and the challenges teachers experience when instructing written expression. Additionally, research describing the training and decision making process used by teachers to prepare written expression lessons. A distinction must be made between *what* information is taught during written expression instruction and *how* this information is taught. Throughout this chapter, the purpose and rational of the present study will be clearly understood.

Introduction

Early Written Expression Instruction

The foundation of written expression is established well before children begin formal schooling. More specifically, the experiences a child has prior to entry into school impacts the child's success with the written language instruction presented by classroom teachers (Berninger & May, 2011). Children entering elementary school with increased knowledge of and experience with written expression are better able to devote cognitive resources to the abstract aspects of written expression, such as planning and composition (Puranik, & Lonigan, 2011). Mackenzie (2011) reported that providing a child with a formal schooling environment that mirrors the child's previous learning environments in

the home and in preschool allows the child to be more motivated to complete literacy tasks because the learning environment is familiar. The experiences children have with written expression prior to entering school are important for future skill development. Teachers can create a classroom environment that is supportive of the natural developmental stage children are in, which can assist children in successfully develop written expression skills more quickly (Diamond, Gerde, & Powell, 2008). Teachers' instructional decision making must be sensitive to the varying degrees of knowledge students' bring to the classroom experience.

Factors Impacting Written Expression Instruction

The instructional practices chosen by teachers to teach children how to write impacts students' development of these skills and the current study will focus on the instructional methods selected by teachers. Often times, the information to be taught during written expression lessons is predetermined for teachers, but the methods used to teach this information can be chosen by teachers. The individualized guidance and support provided by teachers is likely influential to the development of students' written expression skills, however, there is no simple way to measure or monitor these interactions (Diamond et al., 2008). Many other factors in the environment have the potential to impact student success in written expression. Some of these other factors include attitude and motivation, environmental factors, and the presence of learning disabilities (Anderson, Mallow, Nee, & Wear, 2003). Additionally, Dixon et al. (2011) suggest that well developed written expression skills depend on the availability of social interactions, adequate cognitive functioning of the student, and the student's emotional connection to the material. Using a social cognitive perspective to increase appropriate

teaching strategies for early childhood education has been shown to increase children's abilities to fully develop written expression skills (Box, 2002; Dyson, 1991; Dyson, 2010). Classroom writing supports (e.g., paper, availability of writing tools, and a visual alphabet) are helpful to students, but teacher interaction is likely more closely related to student success (Diamond et al., 2008).

Recognizing the factors that can influence a student's success in written expression is important because in order for students to be able to participate meaningfully in society as adults, they must develop proficient reading and writing skills (Risher, 2006). Written expression allows people to communicate with others throughout the world, to persuade others to agree with an opinion, and to express one's self (Graham et al., 2007). Students are expected to demonstrate knowledge of other academic subjects through written expression and poor written expression skills can contribute to a lack of success across academic subjects (Robinson & Howell, 2008). Additionally, the literacy skills possessed by students when entering kindergarten strongly predict future educational achievement, highlighting the need to mediate low student skills immediately in a child's educational career (Diamond et al., 2008). For these reasons, written expression instruction is clearly important and understanding the challenges faced by teachers instructing this subject is important to student success.

Written Expression Proficiency

Students develop written expression skills more easily through activities that are personally relevant to them with teachers who facilitate these experiences (Mackenzie, 2011). Gilbert and Graham (2010) found that upper elementary school teachers reported about half of their students to be proficient writers, about 18% to be above average

writers and about 33% to be below average writers. This indicates that teachers are aware that many students are lacking necessary written expression skills; however, the estimates made by teachers are very different from the nationally available data. From 1998 to 2002, fourth grade students and eighth grade students demonstrated slightly improved written expression scores, but twelfth grade students performed at a slightly lower level across the two testing years (United States Department of Education, 2003). Twenty-three percent of fourth grade students were at or above the Proficient level in 1998, while 28% of fourth grade students were in the same category in 2002 (United States Department of Education, 2003) . Twenty-seven percent of eighth graders were at or above the Proficient level in 1998 and this increased to 31% in 2002 (United States Department of Education, 2003). In 1998, 22% of twelfth grade students were at or above Proficient and this number rose to 24% in 2002 (United States Department of Education, 2003). In 2011, similar data were available for only eighth and twelfth grade students, and changed only slightly with eighth grade student performance decreasing and twelfth grade student performance increasing (United States Department of Education, 2011). The United States Department of Education (2011) states that only 24% of eighth and twelfth grade students were proficient writers in based on data from the 2009-2010 academic year. Despite data demonstrating that most students are consistently lacking necessary written expression skills over many years, meaningful change has not been made in classrooms as the data show similar rates of student skills over time. In 2012 52% of all third grade students in the state of Colorado demonstrated either Proficient or Advanced skills on the Transitional Colorado Assessment Program (TCAP), indicating that nearly half of third graders are lacking necessary written expression skills.

Most students nationally fail to demonstrate at least proficient skills in written expression (United States Department of Education, 2011), and many teachers report devoting only approximately two to three hours per week to written expression in the classroom (Gilbert & Graham, 2010; National Commission on Writing, 2006). Written expression instruction is often times not given the necessary attention for children to become proficient writers (Robinson & Howell, 2008), and it has been ranked as one of elementary school teachers least favorite subjects to instruct (Wilkins, 2010). The reason for conducting the current study is that only limited information is available to indicate what is taking place during written expression instruction in early elementary school classrooms. Additionally, many students at all grade levels are performing at a non-proficient level and in order to help students perform at a proficient level, education professionals must begin to better understand the current limitations contributing to limited student ability to demonstrate knowledge in all academic areas through written expression. Many different factors contribute to student learning and the instructional decision making process used by teachers can help or hinder students' learning process. Examining the current experiences of early elementary school teachers can help education professionals to better understand the practices used in classrooms and how these may contribute to low student skills.

Iowa Test of Basic Skills

The Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) is a norm referenced test administered annually to approximately 4 million kindergarten through eighth grade students throughout the United States (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011). The test includes many aspects of academic knowledge, including Language, which is assessed for every grade

level. For students in kindergarten through second grades, the test is primarily administered orally, with more sophisticated skills included at each grade level (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011). Because the test is norm referenced, student scores are based on comparisons to one another, rather than compared to expected skill development; however, this assessment provides school based professions with the opportunity to compare their students to students throughout the United States.

Importance of Building Basic Skills on Future Achievement

The development of basic written expression skills has been demonstrated to impact the development of more complex written expression skills later in one's education (Coop, White, Tapscott & Lee, 1983). Similarly, students lacking basic reading skills have been found to struggle later academically and in development of future reading skills (Spira, Bracken, Fischel, 2005). Most states have adopted the Common Core State Standards for writing, which outlines written expression subject matter to be taught to students at each grade level. The skills to be taught begin at a basic level and become more complex as students progress throughout the educational system (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012). This design suggests that students must learn and master simpler skills prior to learning more sophisticated skills. Additionally, as students spend more time involved in formal education, they have increased exposure to print and develop emergent reading skills, which are skills that transfer to the ability to learn more challenging written expression skills (Puranik & Lonigan, 2011).

Model of Written Expression Education

Definition of Written Expression

Written expression has been defined in many different ways by different researchers, spanning the spectrum very broad to rather specific definitions. Dyson (1991) states that written expression is defined broadly as an aspect of a child's oral language development because students generally have an internal dialogue about the information that will be written(Friedland, 1990). When a broad and inclusive definition of written expression is used the knowledge of all students, particularly diverse learners, can be accurately measured and more students can successfully complete written expression tasks in the way most appropriate for them (Dixon et al., 2011; Robinson & Howell, 2008). A broad and inclusive definition not only allows for examination of a child's ability to put pencil to paper and produce text in that manner, but also addresses the child's ability to cognitively create new ideas as part of the writing process. Robinson and Howell (2008) state that written expression "requires the writer to assign words to thoughts" (p.439) in a way that is meaningful to others, but the manner in which the writer does this can vary based on the individual's ability level. Specifically for children with diverse learning needs, written expression can be considered to be completed by type or by using pencil and paper. This gives children who do not have the motor skills or physical capabilities to handwrite information the opportunity to demonstrate the full range of knowledge they possess (Dixon et al., 2011).

Robinson and Howell (2008) explicitly state that written expression requires the individual to have a purpose for creating the text, indicating that it must be goal driven behavior. They also note that written expression must include the individual's ability to

use words to communicate personal thoughts (Robinson & Howell, 2008). For the purposes of the current study, the definition of written expression is communication that is goal directed in nature through which an individual assigns words to independent thoughts in order to express one's self. This definition is useful because it allows the behavior to be goal directed in a variety of different ways, accounting for diverse learning needs. A variety of tasks can therefore be considered written expression. Several different theoretical perspectives have been developed to explain the breadth of information to be taught during written expression instruction.

Author and Secretary Roles

The first theoretical perspective explaining the information to be taught during written expression instruction divides the writing tasks into the author and secretary roles. Dixon et al. (2011) state that the written expression skills children need to learn can be divided in to 'author' and 'secretary' skills. Students use the author or secretary role to complete different tasks in the writing process. Robinson and Howell (2008) consider the role of the author to be using the *concepts* of written expression because a person in the author role is responsible for the broad content of the text. The *concepts* of written expression include developing an understanding of multiple genres, ability to use one's voice through written expression, and ability to write for a variety of audiences. The secretary's role (Dixon et al., 2011) in written expression is to focus on the mechanics of the text, including punctuation, capitalization, handwriting and grammar rules (Robinson & Howell, 2008).

Big Ideas in Written Expression

Another perspective of the information to be taught during written expression instruction places emphasis on several broad written expression concepts. Students who have well developed mechanical skills are able to create more interesting text that is appealing to readers (Graham et al., 2007). Robinson and Howell state that there are six main ideas (commonly called the "big ideas") in written expression that are the most important areas to address in written expression lessons, which are also related to the author and secretary roles. Big ideas are not skills that have been selected to be taught in written expression, but they are the areas that are taught in most often successful written expression programs (Dixon et al., 2011). The big ideas do not fall only in to either the author or secretary role, but overlap in to both categories at times. The first big idea is fluency, which is the speed at which a writer creates content. The next big idea is legibility, which is the neatness and readability of written text. The third big idea is conventions, which includes skills such as spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and knowledge of paragraph creation. Syntax and grammar is the fourth big idea and this is the writer's skills at using proper sentence structure. The fifth big idea is semantics, which is the writer's ability to understand the meaning of words and sentences. The final big idea in written expression is content and this is the writer's ability to connect all of the material within the final product. All of the big ideas should be addressed in a written expression curriculum in order for a child to have a well-rounded written expression education.

Common Core State Standards

The Common Core Standards are another perspective of the content to include in written expression lessons. The Common Core Standards in Writing are designed to ensure that students in all grade levels develop a broad range of skills in this subject area and to increase consistency in the content taught in written expression lessons (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2012). The standards are designed for build on one another from grade level to grade level. The written expression standards include four main topic areas which are Text Types and Purposes, Production and Distribution of Writing, Research to Build and Present Knowledge and Range of Writing. Standards are included for all of these topic areas at all grade levels, except the Range of Writing which begins in third grade. Text Types and Purposes includes standards related to writing for varied audiences and in multiple genres. The Production and Distribution of Writing standards related to editing, revising and using electronic media to create written expression. The final content area applicable to kindergarten through second grade students, Research to Build and Present Knowledge, includes standards related to gathering and reporting information at a developmentally appropriate level. The Common Core Standards Initiative was developed to increase consistency in the content taught during written expression instruction throughout the United States, and these standards have been adopted by 45 states; however, even with adoption of these standards, classroom teachers make instructional decisions related to how this information is taught (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012).

National Council on the Teaching of English and the International Reading Association Written Expression Standards

In addition to the roles of the secretary and author, the big ideas of written expression, and the Common Core State Standards, The National Council on the Teaching of English and the International Reading Association (1996) has provided standards of the teaching of written expression (Appendix A). These standards explain that students must have written expression skills to use multiple genres, communicate with a wide range of people, and assist the writer in meeting his or her needs.

Viewing Written Expression as a Process

Written expression is unique compared to other academic subjects because of its cyclical nature and the multiple roles that students must take on in order to be successful. Students who are proficient writers should spend most of the allotted written expression time moving through the written expression process cyclically, rather than simply writing new text during each class period (Graham et al., 2007). The stages in the writing process include planning, transcribing or drafting, reviewing and revising, editing, and publishing (Robinson & Howell, 2008). Students must be taught to use each of these stages of the written expression process and they must be taught the necessary skills to be successful in each of the stages. The secretary role, author role, the big ideas of written expression, and the stages in the writing process can be used to guide the information that teachers choose to include in classroom lessons. Teachers must be able to balance the primary aspects of written expression instruction (Robinson & Howell, 2008) and students must learn to integrate mechanics in to the written expression process. Robinson and Howell (2008)

also state that in order for students to be successful writers, they must build a foundation in either written expression *concepts* or written expression *skills*. Students must spend time in both the author and secretary role in order to understand the purpose and tasks of both roles equally well (Dixon et al., 2011). Once a student has built a foundation of either the written expression *concepts* or the written expression *skills*, the student will be able to perform those tasks more easily and require fewer cognitive resources to complete those skills successfully in the future (Robinson & Howell, 2008). Students are then able to place increased cognitive focus on to the other area of written expression, therefore completing both roles more successfully (Robinson & Howell, 2008).

Several different theoretical perspectives have been developed to explain the content to be included in written expression lessons. The first perspective is the Author and Secretary roles (Dixon, et. al, 2011; Robinson & Howell, 2008). The Big Ideas also explain the important content to include in written expression lessons (Robinson & Howell, 2008). The Common Core Standards have been developed and adopted by many state in an effort to increase consistency in the content taught in written expression lessons across the United States (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012). The National Council on the Teaching of English and the International Reading Association Written Expression Standards were developed in 1996 as an attempt to increase consistency among written expression lessons; however, it was not as widely recognized as the Common Core Standards (National Council on the Teaching of English and the International Reading Association Written Expression Standards (1996). All of these perspectives recognize the importance of identifying written expression development as a process that must be consistently expanded from grade level to grade level.

Incorporating Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory

Each of the perspectives outlined above regarding what to include in written expression lessons outline the content to be included in such lessons; however, these perspectives do not provide information regarding how to teach this information. Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory is a common framework for conceptualizing written expression education because written expression is considered to be a social activity. The premise of social cognitive theory is that people are active participants in the conditioning process and that individuals actively engage in behaviors in the environment to create the most favorable outcomes for themselves (Weiten, 2005). Additionally, social cognitive theory suggests that personality is developed through learning experiences in the natural environment (Weiten, 2005). Social cognition also includes the concept that individuals are knowledgeable about the ideas, perceptions, and intentions of others (Pinel, 2011). When children are knowledgeable about the perspective of others, they can understand how others will perceive text that they have authored and understand the necessary mechanical skills for the text to be clear. This highlights the importance of students functioning in the role of both the author and the reader during classroom activities, such as peer review.

Through a social cognitive perspective, learning can take place vicariously through observation of other's interactions as well as through a person's interactions with the world around them (Weiten, 2005). Kim and Baylor (2006) state that, "When individuals perform intellectual activities, they dynamically interact with other participants, tools, and contexts, which could support improved performance and /or

frame individual cognition and intellect" (p.576). Providing students with opportunities for social interactions in the classroom allows children to connect to experiences on a personal level.

Using Social Cognitive Theory to Teach Written Expression

Dudley-Marling and Paugh (2009) state that, "writing is an inherently social activity," (p.7), and that knowledge of written expression is shared by all members of the classroom, not simply the teacher. Additionally, Dudley-Marling and Paugh suggest several classroom activities listed below that teachers can use that support social learning. Students can be responsible for creating and sharing short written expression lessons for classmates on personally chosen topics. This allows students to learn from the perspective of another student, rather than only from the teacher. In addition, students can do collaborative written expression tasks to create texts with classmates, allowing struggling writers to learn from proficient writers in an authentic setting. Students should be given opportunities to talk with others about the written texts that they have created independently or collaboratively. Through this activity, students can share feedback, discuss the experience of creating written text, and explain the experience of the text's audience to the text's author. Teachers can provide students with opportunities to share final written products through "Author's Chair" or publishing. This gives students the chance to celebrate the written work by showing it to other students, while the audience is able to gain new ideas to incorporate in to writing.

While making instructional decisions, teachers may choose to include aspects of social cognitive theory. By encouraging children to engage in social learning when writing, students who are lacking developmentally appropriate written expression skills

are able to improve these skills by observing the methods that other children are using (Dyson, 1991). Additionally, children should be given the opportunity to draw from natural aspects of the environment, such as personal experiences with literature and language (Strickland, Bodino, Buchan, Jones, Nelson, & Rose, 2001). Students should have frequent opportunities to share their written work with peers in order to receive feedback and practice writing for a variety of audiences (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2009). Graham et al. (2007) simply state that, "Writers write for audiences" (p. 4). By interacting with others throughout the writing process, students are able to predict future reader's experiences with the text. Teachers have the opportunity to embed these activities in written expression lessons.

Written Expression Education Teaching Methods

Developmentally Appropriate Written Expression Instruction

Developing pre-writing skills. Children begin to engage in early print at approximately three to four years old, generally when they are enrolled in formal educational settings. During the preschool years, children tend to understand that written expression is symbolic and has meaning (Diamond et al., 2008). Developmentally appropriate instruction matches the foundational skills that children naturally bring to the educational environment. Mackenzie (2011) examined the use of incorporating student drawings into student written expression. Mackenzie reported that changing the focus of teachers away from exclusively written texts requires a shift in teacher priorities, and an increased focus on the students' natural skills. This shift can reduce student frustration and encourage students to continue to engage in written expression activities because the

lessons are more natural to them (Mackenzie, 2011). Instructional decisions can be made to build on the basic skills students have prior to formal education. Adding drawing to the written expression process can be used to ensure that students continue to express themselves creatively, rather than becoming burdened with the mechanics inherent to the written expression process (Anderson et al., 2003; Mackenzie, 2011). This strategy can be used by teachers to meet students in the natural developmental stage, but generally requires new thinking by teachers.

Teacher beliefs regarding developmentally appropriate and inappropriate behaviors have been found to contribute to elementary school classroom practices (Maxwell et al., 2001) Teachers' instructional decision making process can include building on the foundational written expression skills students possess. In the preschool years, children demonstrate an understanding of content knowledge in the presentation of written text, including flow from left to right and top to bottom (Diamond et al., 2008). Near five-years-old, children begin to ask those within the environment how to make letters or words correctly; however, children commonly continue to make letters backwards for a few years (Berk, 2010). This represents a shift from focus on the author role to focus on the secretary role. The change indicates that children are beginning to understand the *skills* domain of written expression instead of only the *content* domain, and teachers can create lessons to build on these foundational skills. Around kindergarten, most children have at least a basic understanding of the two broad roles of written expression.

Initial written expression skills. Children's growth in written expression sophistication has been associated with development of letter knowledge and

understanding of print concepts throughout preschool (Diamond et al., 2008). In other words, as children develop in the written expression *skills* domain, they also develop in the written expression *content* domain. Most children demonstrate similar features in early written expression, suggesting a natural progression of children's skills prior to any formal educational exposure (Puranik & Lonigan, 2011). When children initially begin writing, they typically do not include complete sentences or correct spelling. Early scribbles tend to have meaning that the child is able to express verbally, but that the child lacks the skills to express through written expression (Puranik & Lonigan, 2011). Additionally at this time children begin to dictate stories describing pictures they have drawn, indicating an understanding that the drawing is purposeful and has a meaningful context, similar to written expression (Dyson, 1991). By using pictures in this way, children are also demonstrating an understanding that symbols can be used for communication with others.

Teaching Strategies

Classroom structure. Two important characteristics of successful writing classrooms are engaging environments where students spend the vast majority of time working on appropriately challenging academic content (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007) and classrooms with consistent instruction individually, in small groups, and as a whole class (Pressley, Mohan, Fingeret, Reffitt, and Raphael-Bogaert, 2007). Additionally, effective written expression instruction takes place daily to assist students in learning new written expression skills and practicing the written expression process (Pressley, Mohan, Fingeret, et al., 2007). Written expression class periods can be structured in different ways, but Dudley-Marling and Paugh (2009) suggest that teachers include brief lessons at

either the beginning or end of the class period with the remaining time devoted to independent student writing. This allows time for teachers to address whole-class general instruction while also leaving time for individualized support. Teachers can conduct writing conferences with students individually to gauge each student's knowledge of the required written expression process and skills (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2009). About half of teachers report using commercial written expression curricula to support classroom instruction, with the most common being 6 Traits, Lucy Calkin's Writers Workshop, Step Up To Writing, and 4-Square (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). Although teachers may have only limited opportunities to determine what is included in lessons, teachers can make decisions about how information is taught.

Explicit instruction. Activities such as modeling are also beneficial to students, but some aspects of written expression, such as mechanics, require explicit lessons presented by teachers to ensure that students are learning new written expression tools (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2009). Priming student background knowledge and explicitly teaching written expression strategies is beneficial to student learning (Cox, Shanahan, & Tinzman, 1991; Graham, Harris & MacArthur, 2006; Servetti, 2010). Students are generally more successful when specific instructions are given prior to beginning a written expression task (Risher, 2006). Building on basic skills possessed by students prior to a new lesson allows them to learn at a gradual pace and avoid frustration.

Social activities as learning tools. Peer to peer social learning is an effective teaching strategy for written expression education (Dyson, 2010). As students gain written expression skills, more complex social learning activities can be used in classrooms. Providing students with the opportunity to work with peers collaboratively

gives children a sense of ownership of written work and moves the child's focus from one of individual literacy to a shared experience of literacy with others (Dyson, 2010). By using these activities, students gain a better understanding of creating material to be understood by an audience (Dixon et al., 2011). Students have the experience of both an author and a reader, while also having the opportunity to play both the role of the student and teacher to help each other learn new written expression techniques (Servetti, 2010). Peer editing is one of the most common peer to peer activities students engage in during written expression lessons (Peterson, 2011). Additionally, students are able to learn from the diverse perspectives and experiences of classmates (Dyson, 2010). Structuring the classroom activities in this way may initially seem challenging to teachers, but it can increase students' likelihood for success in the future.

Research suggests that written expression is most effectively learned when social components are included in the learning process (Berk, 2010; Box 2002; Dixon et al., 2011; Dyson, 1991; Dyson, 2010; Florio, 1979; Sevetti, 2010). Servetti (2010) conducted a classroom case study to examine the use of cooperative learning groups as a teaching strategy for written expression instruction. She found that the vast majority of students reported a belief that the cooperative activities assisted them in learning written expression strategies, and the students were able to offer suggestions to each other regarding written composition (Servetti, 2010). Additionally, classrooms can be organized by teachers in a way that facilitates communication between students in the classroom and uses related evidence based practices to increase the likelihood that students will become proficient writers (Dixon et al., 2011). Currently a challenge to teachers in incorporating social cognitive theory when teaching written expression are the

requirements associated with federally mandated testing, which has led to an increase in structured teaching styles, and deviation from socially mediated learning (Dyson, 2010).

Written expression activities. The most common types of written expression classroom assignments were found to be short responses, journaling, and responses to reading assignments (Peterson, 2011). Students on average completed at least four written expression assignments involving multiple paragraphs (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). Teachers have the opportunity to structure these activities in a way that will prepare students for life outside of that specific academic environment. As teachers increase the written expression demands on students during written expression lessons, they can also require a higher level of student writing in other academic subjects (Pressley, Mohan, Fingeret, et al, 2007). This allows teachers to build students' abilities to write in different styles and to integrate written expression instruction across academic subjects. Teachers can connect written expression activities with lessons in other subjects to help students find meaning in the written expression task, such as using expository written expression assignments in social studies lessons (Strickland et al., 2001). Cox et al. (1991) encourage teachers to prime student knowledge of the type of written expression task to be completed to increase the likelihood of student success, especially when students are writing in the more challenging expository genre.

Description of a successful written expression environment. Pressley, Mohan, Raphael, and Fingeret (2007) examined the factors that impacted high written expression achievement in one high achieving elementary school in Michigan. The authors intentionally examined the experiences of high achieving, advantaged students because they stated that the experiences of low achieving, disadvantaged students are more often

researched. Students in this school were reported to primarily have attended preschool and to have parents actively involved in student homework completion. Several aspects of the school were described as factors that impacted student success in written expression. All teachers were found to be skilled at teaching reading and written expression, as well as devoting significant amounts of classroom time to engaging academic activities. These teachers were found to use explicit teaching strategies, scaffold lessons, and include high self-regulation expectations in classroom planning. Each year all students created a portfolio of written work that was then passed on to the next year's teacher and the majority of teachers reported a belief that this portfolio was important to continued student learning. Each portfolio then demonstrated the progressive written expression expectations held by the school's staff members and the increase in complexity of students' abilities.

Additionally Pressley, Mohan, Raphael et al., (2007) wrote that the school included a large school-wide library as well as comprehensive libraries in each classroom. The school's administration was found to strongly emphasize literacy and a print rich environment throughout the entire building. Furthermore, the authors stated that this school had a well-planned language arts immersion curriculum used throughout the building, facilitating student growth in literacy. Additionally, the school was reported to have a consistently positive environment created by staff whereby students were provided with encouragement throughout all aspects of the school day. Each of these factors were reported independently by teachers within this school and were found by the authors to have a positive impact on the ability of students to excel with written expression skills.

Optimally challenging written expression lessons. Berninger and May (2011) state that using evidence based developmentally appropriate practices to teach written expression is important for learning. Additionally, the role of teachers in written expression education is to use scaffolding to help children learn more efficient ways to manage written text (Box, 2002). In order for teachers to successfully scaffold lessons, the control of the students' written expression must eventually return to the students, rather than remaining with the teacher (Risher, 2006). If teachers do not appropriately scaffold lessons, students can become dependent on the assistance provided by the teacher or peers in the classroom (Dixon et al., 2011). Teachers can scaffold both the author and secretary roles through different instructional activities. This can be especially challenging for beginning teachers, but returning the control of the activity back to students is essential to allowing students to write about authentic experiences (Strickland et al., 2001). Teachers can strike a balance classroom support and development of self-regulation strategies (Pressley, Mohan, Fingeret, et al., 2007).

A balance must be found between teaching strategies for effective writing and teaching basic written expression skills to be sure that written expression is taking place in a meaningful context (Robinson & Howell, 2008). In addition, teachers must be mindful of student skill development of author and secretary roles. Curricula available for teachers may specifically script the lesson, or may allow teachers to determine appropriate tasks independently (Berninger & May, 2011). In order for students to have well developed written expression skills, they should begin with simple written expression tasks and then move to more difficult tasks with teacher support (Dixon et al., 2011).

Needs in Successful Written Expression Lessons

Dixon et al. (2011) state that similar to other academic subject areas, in order for students to become more successful at writing expression, they must spend more time in school engaging in meaningful writing activities. Writing is no different than other academic subjects in that students require explicit instruction that meets individualized needs, despite some incorrect assumptions about activities such as writing workshop, that students will naturally learn the necessary skills (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2009). Furthermore, classrooms that do not require students to write multiple drafts tend to produce students who lack proficient writing skills (Pressley, Mohan, Fingeret, et al., 2007). Additionally, these researchers report that students should have a predictable writing schedule in the classroom to allow for continued work on the same piece of writing over time, instead of beginning a new text during each writing class period. Despite this suggestion, many classrooms students do not have a predictable time allocated for writing (Pressley, Mohan, Fingeret, et al., 2007). Classrooms must also be designed to support literacy and student writing in an engaging manner, which frequently occurs in kindergarten and first grade, but reportedly declines as students progress through elementary school (Pressley, Mohan, Fingeret, et al., 2007).

The instructional practices used by teachers influence the progress students make in written expression, including limited explicit written expression instruction and student perception of teacher feedback (Anderson, et al., 2003). Risher (2006) reports three common weaknesses in the teaching of written expression, which are unclear objectives, insufficient direct instruction, and insufficient attention to the planning and process of creating written text. Not all methods for teaching writing have a research base to suggest

that they are effective and teachers should seek out those methods with research support to increase the likelihood of student success (Perin, 2007). In order for students to have well rounded skills in written expression, they must be instructed in both content and skills, but a balance is often times not struck between these two areas of written expression (Robinson & Howell, 2008). Additionally, there is no evidence to suggest that students will develop the mechanics of writing without explicit instruction (Dixon et al., 2011). When combined, this research suggests that some aspects of writing should be taught explicitly, while students should also engage in natural social interactions to learn other aspects of writing (Anderson et al., 2003; Dixon et al., 2011; Perin, 2007; Robinson & Howell, 2008). Furthermore, students must learn how to write, instead of simply learning about writing and students must have consistent time to practice writing skills; however, this frequently does not occur in classrooms due to time limitations (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2009).

A Developmental Approach to Written Expression Instruction

The primary focus of Chapter II and the current study is on written expression education for children in elementary school. The purpose of this section of the chapter is to explore written expression instruction prior to elementary school and following elementary school. Exploring teacher beliefs across a developmental continuum is important because teachers' self-reported beliefs regarding child behavior were found to be more developmentally appropriate for children in earlier grades, and less developmentally appropriate as children age (Vartuli, 1999). By using a developmental

approach to exploring written expression instruction, I am better able to understand the broader context in which written expression instruction takes place in elementary school.

Teaching written expression in preschool. Children's home lives impact the amount of knowledge they possess about language prior to entry in to preschool, and in order to develop proficient written expression skills children must understand that it can be used for communication (Coker, 2007). During the preschool years Box (2002) encourages teachers to incorporate modeling of the thought process driving written expression as a teaching strategy. She calls this process 'guided writing' and describes it as the teacher speaking about the content and mechanics that comprise the text. To complete this process the teacher should slowly write while asking for the students' opinions about spelling, the sequence of the story, word usage and mechanics (Box, 2002). Through modeling, the teacher demonstrates the cognitive thought process used for correcting mistakes and making decisions about text formation (Box, 2002). This allows children to explicitly understand the process used by the teacher to create a body of written work (Box, 2002). Additionally, students begin to understand how spoken word appears once it has been written (Berninger & Wagner, 2008). Young children tend to have more experience with spoken word than written word, and therefore understand the usefulness of spoken word more easily (Coker, 2007). Box further reports that teachers should create opportunities for students to exchange ideas with one another in large or small groups during the preschool years to ensure that they are able to learn about the perspective of others and incorporate new material to create an individualized writing process. In order to mediate the differences that students enter school with,

teachers can use natural children's play to purposefully create activities that incorporate literacy (Coker, 2007).

Teaching written expression in secondary education. Proficient written expression skills are essential for students in secondary education because students must be able to demonstrate knowledge in other subject areas through written expression (Newell, Koukis, & Boster, 2007). As children progress through education, they must be able to explain more complex ideas through written expression and teachers in secondary education primarily assign written expression tasks to have students demonstrate knowledge (Perin, 2007). Constructivist approaches to written expression are becoming more common in today's schools and through this framework academic knowledge in one subject is considered to develop in conjunction with knowledge in other subject areas (Newell et al., 2007). This type of activity is commonly called "writing-to-learn", whereas explicit instruction in the writing process would be called "learning-to-write". Writing-to-learn activities can take place in all academic subjects. Gilbert and Graham (2010) hypothesized that written expression is often times not given the necessary amount of classroom time in upper grades because teachers may believe that students in secondary settings already have foundational writing skills. Additionally, written expression is often considered to be a subject that should only be the concern of the English teacher, although student written expression abilities impact knowledge development across academic areas (Newell et al., 2007).

Teacher Experiences of Instructing Written Expression

Several sets of guidelines have been created to explain the content that should be included in written expression lessons. The Common Core State Standards have been

adopted by nearly all states in the United States and this serves to increase consistency regarding the information to be taught during written expression lessons (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2011). These standards do not detail how the information should be taught to students. Many teachers do not receive adequate training in teacher training programs to instruct written expression (Gilbert & Graham, 2011). Whether teachers received adequate written expression instruction training many teachers rely on personal experiences and beliefs when instructing this subject (Stipek & Byler, 1997; Vartuli, 1999; Vartuli, 2005). This section explores the impact of teacher beliefs on instructional decision making and practices.

Impact of Teacher Beliefs Related to Instructional Decision Making

Personal beliefs of teachers. Vartuli (2005) writes that, "Philosophical principals, theories, and belief systems guide teachers' expectations about child behavior and the decisions they make in classrooms" (p.78). Additionally, Vartuli states that teachers' personal beliefs impact multiple aspects of classrooms. Similarly, Maxwell et al. (2001) found that, "classroom characteristics, teacher characteristics, and teacher beliefs account for almost half the variance in observed classroom practices" (p. 442). Throughout a single school day teachers must make many instructional decisions and these decisions have implications for students (Stipek & Byler, 1997). The impact of teacher beliefs is not only present in elementary school classrooms, but also in teacher training programs (Stipek & Byler, 1997). Instructors of teacher training programs also have personal beliefs and values related to education that impact their own instruction, which future teachers are then exposed to (Stipek & Byler, 1997). These findings indicate

that teachers' personal beliefs impact what takes place in elementary school classrooms and demonstrates the importance of seeking to better understand how teachers' personal beliefs impact instructional decision making.

Teachers' instructional decisions are sometimes guided by educational theory, most often that of Jean Piaget, and implementation of a theoretical perspective is sometimes related to personal teacher values (Stipek & Byler, 1997). Stipek and Byler (1997) found that preschool and kindergarten teachers had belief systems more closely related to their teaching practices compared to first grade teachers. Kindergarten and first grade teachers in this study were reported to follow either a basic skills or child centered approach to teaching. These teachers reported incompatible beliefs between the two theories, whereas first grade teachers did not report a belief that these two theories were incompatible with one another (Stipek & Byler, 1997). Additionally, Stipek and Byler wrote that inconsistencies were found between teachers' stated beliefs and actual practices related to student independence, self-concept, basic skills acquisition and fact acquisition. Similarly, Vartuli (1999) reported that teachers' behavior and beliefs were more correlated with one another for Head Start and kindergarten teachers compared to teachers of other elementary school grades. This was explained in part by differing expectations for children's development at each age (Vartuli, 1999).

Barriers to altering beliefs. Throughout literature examining professional development there is little to indicate success in changing teacher beliefs through these programs (Gusky, 1986). One challenge reported by Maxwell et al., (2001) to changing teacher beliefs is that educational attainment was unrelated to belief changes. This indicates that providing teachers with increased education will likely not create

meaningful change in teachers' belief systems. Similarly, Vartuli (1999) wrote that teachers with increased educational levels did not have more accurate beliefs of developmentally appropriate behavior. However, grade level of instruction, educational level, and personal beliefs were found to significantly predict teachers' classroom behaviors and changing teachers' educational level is likely the easiest predictor to change (Maxwell et al., 2001).Stipek and Byler (1997) state that, "beliefs, therefore, may need to be changed to effect any change in practices" (p. 322).

In order to more easily create change in instructional decision making, Stipek and Byler (1997) write that personal goals of teachers must be considered prior to in-service trainings. Although professional development presentations are typically used to increase teacher knowledge, they often times ignore the factors that actually motivate teachers (Gusky, 1986). Teachers' theoretical perspectives of instruction are related to inherent beliefs of instruction (Stipek & Byler, 1997). These perspectives illustrate the challenges to altering teacher beliefs, but also the importance of the impact of teacher beliefs on instructional decision making.

Teacher Opinions of Written Expression Practices

Gilbert and Graham (2010) conducted a study surveying 100 fourth grade through sixth grade teachers in the United States to gain an understanding of the experiences of teachers with written expression instruction. Most of the teachers in this study reported that they slightly enjoy teaching writing. In addition, many of these teachers reported that they did not receive the necessary training while in teacher education programs to successfully teach elementary school students how to become proficient writers. Sixty-five percent of participants reported that they received no preparation to teach written

expression. Most teachers reported that they received their primary training on this subject after college, typically through school-based in-service programs or personal endeavors. Gilbert and Graham also stated that all states do not require that teachers have specific written expression instruction training in teacher education programs. When teachers lack specialized training, they are less likely to make informed decisions about what to include in lessons and how to most effectively teach this information to students (Wilkins, 2010). Because most teachers have not had explicit instruction themselves on how to teach written expression, schools must commit to investing in this education if they plan to produce proficient writers (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). Teachers should be taught to teach the written expression process effectively to students by using explicit instruction, modeling and whole-class, small group, and individualized instruction (Pressley et al., 2007).

Despite a lack of training, teachers must make instructional decisions regarding written expression. The task of instructing all academic subjects can be daunting for elementary school teachers and teachers' personal beliefs about instruction impact these decisions (Wilkins, 2010). Gilbert and Graham (2010) found that the most common activities used by teachers in the classroom were summarization, strategy instruction for planning, revision/editing, and paragraph construction. These activities were generally taught several times per month or more. Additionally Gilbert and Graham stated that handwriting, inquiry and typing were only rarely taught. Most teachers reported that they establish writing goals for students, have students complete prewriting activities, and use the process approach to written expression (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). Peer collaboration was reported to be used in about half of the writing lessons, while word processing was

used in less than half of writing lessons (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). Most teachers reported that they believed they were using evidence based practices many times per year, but only a few reported using these practices a few times per week or per month (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). In addition, an important predictor of student success in classroom writing activities is the teacher's passion for writing, highlighting the need for teachers to enthusiastically teach such lessons and demonstrate personal enjoyment of writing to students (Pressley et al., 2007). Furthermore, teachers who do not spend time writing themselves typically struggle to understand the challenges that new writers face and may lack an understanding of the unique characteristics of each student's writing process (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2009).

Inconsistent Written Expression Expectations

In addition to teachers lacking training in instructing writing, many teachers report that writing standards, writing instruction and writing assessment often times do not match with one another in a practical world (Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Strickland et al., 2001). This creates more challenges to determine what material to cover when teaching writing because teachers receive conflicting messages about what information should ultimately be taught to students. Despite limited knowledge about specific strategies and content to be taught during writing instruction, teachers report goals for students writing development including developing self-expression strategies, understanding different genres, mechanics, learning to enjoy writing and finding self-confidence in the process (Peterson, 2011).

Understanding Teaching Practices
During School-Wide Reform

Troia, Lin, Cohen, and Monroe (2011) sought to understand teachers' perspectives of written expression instruction while undergoing school wide reform and education in an urban elementary school in Washington through a qualitative study. Broadly, the study was examining the school, teacher, and student characteristics influencing teachers' abilities to adopt innovative teaching strategies and how these characteristics impacted student success. The researchers wanted to understand the specific teaching practices used in the classroom, personal teacher beliefs about writing instruction, and whether or not teachers' personal beliefs about writing instruction impact actual teaching practices used. The study included six teachers who taught between second and fifth grades and had anywhere from one year to 28 years of teaching experience. All of the teachers were involved in a school wide program to increase the use of writing workshop. Teachers were to devote 45 minutes per day, four to five days per week to writing workshop. The participants were found to vary in the types of engagement activities used in the classroom, but they were found to consistently allow students to share written work with others. Additionally, the teachers varied greatly in the number of different instructional practices used during lessons. The researchers expressed concern that only half of the participants reported using peer mediated strategies during written expression instruction.

Throughout the school year the teachers involved in this study were not found to notably change their theoretical orientation towards writing and continued to endorse the use of explicit instruction most highly, closely followed by naturalistic or incidental teaching methods. These teachers reported a belief in their own abilities to effectively

teach students to write, and teachers with higher self-efficacy were more likely to include adaptations for struggling writers. Nearly half of the teachers reported making zero, one, or two adaptations for such students. Troia et al. (2011) reported an overall connection between teachers' personal perspectives about writing instruction and the professional decisions made regarding classroom writing practices.

Teacher Perspectives of Important Aspects of Written Expression Lessons

In a small scale study in the United Kingdom, Risher (2006) interviewed and observed primary school teachers about what they considered to be the important aspects of teaching writing. These teachers reported that clarity, repetition and precision of the lesson were all important aspects of written expression instruction. Additionally, they reported that building student confidence and enjoyment with written expression was done by connecting the written text to relevant aspects of the children's lives. Despite these verbal statements, during observations, the teachers tended to allow few creative outlets and exhibited a great deal of control over the activities. Risher stated that within written expression lessons, teachers have to be able to give students the opportunity to move from what they already know to more complicated tasks, but many teachers struggled to allow this. Additionally, Risher wrote that once students are comfortable with the mechanical aspects of writing, they are cognitively able to place more attention on the creative aspects of the task if the teacher has structured lessons in this way. This study illustrates the challenges that teachers face when incorporating new strategies that they know to be successful in to classroom lessons.

Perspectives of Pre-Service Teachers

Prior to entering teacher training programs, future teachers have already developed beliefs about classroom functioning (Vartuli, 2005). Through focus groups researchers have begun to examine the perspectives of pre-service early childhood and elementary school teachers' perspectives of written expression instruction.

Hall and Grisham-Brown (2011) conducted one focus group including eight pre-service teachers majoring in Early Childhood Education and another focus group including six students majoring in Early Elementary Education. All students were in the final semester of teacher education programs. The students were asked 10 open ended questions about personal opinions of written expression and future plans for instructing written expression. The participants reported that possessing personality characteristics such as being enthusiastic, empathetic and encouraging were personal strengths related to their future abilities to instruct written expression. Additionally, they believed they were most knowledgeable about the teaching strategies of breaking down the writing process for students, allowing students to select topics and to creatively express themselves, and being organized with writing instruction. Participants felt they would be able to provide opportunities for students to write throughout the day and organize the classroom in such a way as to encourage development of written expression skills.

These students reported three primary weaknesses in future written expression instruction which were mechanics, teaching strategies and providing students with feedback. Half of the participants reported plans to include student choice during written expression instruction and 14% reported plans to use process writing methods; however, many did not report plans to use a specific teaching method at all, but instead listed

specific activities they planned to use. Slightly over half (57%) of the participants reported that they would not schedule a specific time to teach written expression and an additional 29% stated that written expression would be embedded within other subjects. In addition, the information gathered from the focus groups indicated that participants' perspectives of written expression instruction were largely influenced by their own experiences writing as students. As participants had had more positive personal experiences, they generally reported more positive feelings about instructing written expression professionally.

Teachers' Values on Written Expression Activities

Understanding the value teachers place on writing activities and the subsequent use of these activities demonstrates the importance of teacher's personal beliefs in lesson planning. A 2012 mixed methods study conducted by Simmerman et al. investigated the perspectives of process writing of 112 public school kindergarten through sixth grade teachers in Utah. These teachers responded to 55 Likert-scale items regarding the value and use of many aspects of written expression instruction. In addition, teachers described perceptions of themselves as writers and what influenced their personal writing instruction in an open-ended format.

The teachers in the Simmerman et al. study reported valuing multiple aspects of written expression more than actually teaching them. As teachers indicated higher value, they indicated more usage, although not to the same degree. In general older teachers were found to value mechanical aspects of written expression more than younger teachers. Overall, teachers indicated that instruction based on student needs had the highest value, followed by daily writing, student sharing of written work, and instructing

writing as a process. The least value was placed on commercial writing programs, dictation, worksheets, and technology based genres (e.g., email or blogging). Teachers reported using independent written expression more often than modeled writing or collaborative writing. They also reported using individual written expression instruction more than either whole class or small group instruction.

On the qualitative aspects of the study, teachers some times reported feeling guilty that some aspects of writing were not taught more often. Participants reported that they did not have the necessary training to sufficiently instruct students or that they lacked important financial and material resources within the school. Teachers indicated that professional development was very important to them in building personal written expression skills. The results of this study indicate that while teachers may value specific aspects of written expression instruction, they also perceive barriers to including this information in classroom lessons.

Teacher Perspectives of Slow Student Growth

Brashears (2006) conducted a qualitative study interviewing and observing 27 educational professionals (including 22 classroom teachers) in one rural elementary school in Kentucky to better understand the reasons that students in the school were not demonstrating improved written expression skills based on results from statewide testing. Brashears primarily wanted to understand what teachers attribute student success in written expression to. In addition, Brashears examined the reasons that participants believed students were not achieving higher than an average ranking on high stakes testing after improvements had been made to the school environment.

Brashears stated that participants reported a wide range of beliefs about student written expression success. One of the primary concerns raised by teachers was the changing statewide guidelines for what should be included in written expression curricula. Teachers reported that following education reform, more emphasis was placed on the writing process than had been previously and that teachers had to carefully examine what they were teaching in the classroom to ensure that it was the most valuable information that could be taught. School staff members identified several contributing factors to students' lack of success on statewide written expression tests including socio-economic status, students' abilities, test validity, rigid testing guidelines, and lack of sufficient writing foundation. Unfortunately, the factors identified by educators largely cannot be altered by classroom instruction, indicating a general teacher belief that they are unable to positively impact student written expression skills. Multiple teachers reported frustration that a simple numerical test score cannot summarize all of the progress that a student has made over time.

Summary of Teacher Perspectives

The personal beliefs possessed by teachers impact classroom practices and instructional decisions (Gusky, 1986; Maxwell et al., 2001; Stipek & Byler, 1997; Vartuli, 1999; Vartuli, 2005). In addition, teachers face many challenges during the written expression instruction process. Informed instructional decision making is hindered by teachers' limited education in written expression (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). Teachers reported making a variety of instructional decisions for varying reasons (Brashears, 2006; Hall & Grisham-Brown, 2011; Risher, 2006; Simmerman et al., 2012);

however teachers generally report a desire to help students to become proficient writers (Brashears, 2006).

Summary

Currently, most children do not have proficient writing skills when they complete high school (United States Department of Education, 2011) and many teachers lack the necessary training to successfully teach elementary school students to write (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). This is concerning because as a result of teachers' instructional decisions, students are able to demonstrate the knowledge they possess in all subjects through written expression, and without proficient skills in writing, students may not be able to demonstrate knowledge in other academic subject areas (Robinson & Howell, 2008). The purpose of this study is to understand the instructional decision making processes of teachers, as well as the methods that teachers are choosing to teach written expression concepts. This information will allow school based professionals to better understand what is taking place during written expression lessons in early elementary school classrooms. These professionals can then use this information to make informed decisions about classroom written expression instruction.

This chapter detailed the information commonly taught in written expression lessons and the teaching strategies that can be used during written expression instruction. In addition, this chapter included information about teacher's perceptions of written expression. The factors that can influence teacher's instructional decision making in general, as well as during written expression instruction have also been explored. By gaining an understanding of the common situations teachers encounter when instructing writing, the purpose of this study can be more clearly defined and the information

gathered from this study can contribute to current literature in a meaningful way. The following chapter includes a detailed description of the methods to be used to complete the current study.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of the current study was to examine the instructional decision making processes of early elementary school teachers when teaching written expression. Many students throughout the United States are lacking the necessary skills to be able to write effectively (United States Department of Education, 2011), causing challenges in later academic and career aspirations (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2008). By examining the experiences of teachers when making instructional decisions, I was better able to understand what took place in classrooms during these lessons, the struggles that teachers faced when teaching written expression, and the foundational knowledge behind instructional decisions. Through a qualitative research design I gathered a rich description of the participants' personal experiences with this subject. Additionally, through the use of multiple methods of data collection trustworthiness was established. The current chapter details the research design, the methodology used, and trustworthiness of the study.

Research Design

A qualitative research design was most appropriate for this study because of the inherent difficulty in quantifying teacher perspectives, experiences and beliefs. Furthermore, the limited professional knowledge of the process of teaching written expression necessitates in-depth and inductive inquiry. Observation and interview, rather

than survey type questions often used in quantitative research served to provide a deep and rich description of the participant's experiences, thus more readily informing the specific research questions of this study. By using a qualitative research design, I explored this topic area in depth so that future questions can be developed for other qualitative and quantitative research.

Through the use of qualitative research, specifically phenomenology, I gained a deep and rich understanding of the personal experiences of each participant with respect to beginning written expression instruction and instructional decision making. Additionally, the study was constructivist in theoretical nature because I examined the meaning participants attached to lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998). Berg (2009) states that, "qualitative research, thus, refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things" (p.3). Through qualitative inquiry, rich descriptions of the data were formed. The data were triangulated through classroom observations, individual interviews with teachers, and review of artifacts (i.e., lesson plans). By conducting interviews and observations, I gained insight into teachers' actions while instructing written expression, the thought process behind instructional decision-making, as well as the meaning these teachers have constructed around instructing this topic. Using a qualitative methodology allowed me to ask open-ended questions to a smaller number of participants and gather rich data regarding a specific phenomenon (Silverman, 2010). Qualitative methodology was most appropriate in this situation because the goals of the study closely aligned with the descriptive nature of qualitative research.

Research Questions

The research questions used in this study were designed to gather information regarding the decision making process of teachers in choosing target skills, instructional strategies, and any modifications to instruction used to teach beginning written expression to early elementary school children. Additionally, I explored the strategies chosen by teachers to better understand what happens in these classrooms. Two primary research questions were examined in this study:

Q1 What is the foundational decision making system for teacher's decisions in selecting instructional content and strategies for beginning writing?

Q2 What thought process guides teachers in selecting content and the different methods and strategies used during written expression lessons?

By answering these research questions, I am better able to understand the experiences of teachers in general education early elementary school classrooms. In addition, I am able to understand potential changes that could be made to assist these teachers in helping students become successful writers.

Methodology

Phenomenology

This study is qualitative in nature and as the researcher, I was the primary method of data collection and data analysis (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study because only a limited research base is presently available. Therefore, an in depth understanding of the experiences of the participants was sought in order to continue to explore this topic and to develop future research questions for further inquiry (Creswell, 2013). "Phenomenological inquiry brings to language perceptions of human experiences with all types of phenomena" (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007, p. 75).

Creswell (2013) states that the purpose of a phenomenological study is to create a universal understanding of a phenomenon. Flood (2010) reports that, "phenomenological research is inductive and descriptive" (p.10). In a phenomenological study, gathering the similar as well as dissimilar lived experiences is vital in order to gain insight in to the unique and shared aspects of each person's experience (Conklin, 2007). A phenomenological design was used because the purpose of this study was to better understand teachers' perspectives of instructing written expression and to later strive to improve the classroom practices for beginning written expression.

The phenomenological movement is reported to have begun in the beginning of the 20th century (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007), and phenomenological research is based on the work completed by a German mathematician, Edmund Husserl (Creswell, 2013). Martin Heidigger was also influential in the origins of phenomenology and these two philosophers worked to transform philosophy in to a more rigorous study (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). The focus of phenomenology is to reveal meaning attached to experiences by participants, rather than to argue a point (Flood, 2010). Additionally, phenomenological research emphasizes the perception of participants, rather than the reality of participants' experiences (Carel, 2011). Creswell (2013) states that, "a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (p.76), compared to other methods of qualitative research that focus on the experience of just one participant. According to Speziale and Carpenter (2007), "phenomenology as a research method is a rigorous, critical, systematic investigation of phenomena" (p. 81).

Merriam (2009) maintains that in some ways, all qualitative research is phenomenological. She further states that present day qualitative researchers use the term *phenomenology* to refer to a specific type of qualitative research, rather than the inquisitive nature that is characteristic of all qualitative research. A true phenomenological study examines the essence of participants' shared experiences. This is referred to by Speziale and Carpenter (2007) as a specific type of phenomenology, which they have called phenomenology of essence. Carel (2011) reports that phenomenological research focuses on the conscious aspects of participants perceptions of lived experiences, while setting aside philosophical aspects of the experience that are outside of the individuals' awareness. This is similarly described by Conklin (2007) when he states that experiences are understood "through creating written descriptions of personal experience as the source of all claims to knowledge" (p. 2). Creswell (2013) further states that when conducting a phenomenological study, the researcher must look for the commonalities among the participants. Thus, a phenomenological design will allow me to find the essence of teachers' experiences of making instructional decisions related to beginning written expression and to create a composite description of that experience.

Theoretical Framework

Researchers enter in to the research process with a paradigm, or theoretical perspective, which guides actions and beliefs throughout the research process (Creswell, 2013). The theoretical perspective of this study was constructivist. Through a constructivist paradigm, Crotty (1998) states that "meaning is not discovered, but constructed" (p.42). In other words, those constructing the meaning of an experience are putting the pieces of the lived experiences together to develop meaning. In addition,

constructivism recognizes the unique perspective used by each individual to create meaning of lived experiences, and it emphasizes respect for each person's unique interpretation of such experiences (Crotty, 1998). Creswell (2013) writes that "individuals seek to understand the world in which they live and work" (p. 24), which guides the process of creating meaning. Innately, individuals combine multiple aspects of the world to construct meaning of various experiences and understand experiences found in the natural world. Individuals combine personal experiences and observations of experiences of others to form perceptions about the world (Talja, Tuominen, & Reijo, 2005). Lee (2011) argues that an individual's mind is exclusively responsible for making meaning of experiences. Because each individual constructs meaning based on his or her own experiences, no two individuals will construct exactly the same meaning even though they may have experienced very similar events (Crotty, 1998).

Meaning is constructed subjectively by each participant, and I must rely on each participant to explain his or her individually constructed views (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, to follow the phenomenological perspective, these experiences will be combined to understand the general essence of all participants' experiences (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). Because each individual creates meaning independently, subjective explanations of experiences must be expected (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). In this sense, subjectivity means that knowledge is constructed through personal, lived experiences, rather than only through formal research means. Similar to the concept of participants constructing meaning individually, I also constructed meaning of my experiences while conducting the present study. The aim of constructivism is not to criticize any individual's interpretation of personal lived experiences, but rather to strive

to understand them (Crotty, 1998). In order for me to create meaning of the participants' experiences through the current study, the underlying assumptions of a constructivist theoretical perspective guided my inquiry.

Researcher Personal Stance

In order to begin to understand the phenomenological experiences of the participants, I must be able to set aside my own personal experiences with the phenomenon that I am exploring (Creswell, 2013).This examination of perspectives and setting aside of beliefs is commonly referred to as bracketing (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) states that it is important for each researcher to examine his or her personal perspective and opinion on the chosen research topic before conducting research study. My experience with written expression began before I was in elementary school, primarily because my mother was a high school English teacher and later taught English at the university level. I grew up in a family committed to literacy, with parents who encouraged me to develop reading and writing skills at an early age. In my family, written expression has been used to communicate with one another often. I remember asking my mother to teach me how to write my name in cursive before starting kindergarten because I loved seeing my older sister use this writing style. I also remember watching my mother write fictional and non-fictional stories for leisure and letters for communication. Written expression has been a valuable tool for members of my family throughout my life.

While in elementary school I enjoyed writing at school, but felt intimidated by the peer evaluation and revision process. In my opinion, I was hindered in developing my own writing skills because I resisted allowing others the opportunity to read my work.

Throughout elementary school my teachers frequently used Writer's Workshop, which allowed me the opportunity to freely write either with or without writing prompts. Throughout my education I have always felt that my writing was a personal process because I viewed it as a creative outlet for my opinions of the world I live in. I am more comfortable now having my work revised by others compared to when I was younger. Similarly to when I was younger, I continue to feel more confident that I can express myself accurately and in a more organized manner through writing rather than through verbal communication. I prefer to have the opportunity to revise what I want to say to better be sure that I am expressing myself accurately. While conducting the present study these personal opinions must be bracketed and I cannot allow my own experiences to impact the research process.

As a graduate student, I have had experiences that may influence my perspective of written language education. I have previous experience working with children to examine alternative methods of assessing the written language skills of early elementary school children. Through these experiences, I have learned about the common information taught during writing lessons and the common assessment methods used in classrooms. Through these experiences I have primarily experienced explicit classroom written expression instruction. In addition, this research has influenced me to believe that writing must be taught and assessed while children are young. I believe that the teaching strategies chosen by teachers impact the learning experiences of students in both positive and negative ways. Through examinations of my personal biases and perspectives related to this subject, I am able to avoid placing judgment on the experience's described by participants and examine the data objectively (Merriam, 2009).

My literature review indicates that written language education must become more comprehensive in order to ensure that all children are receiving a well-rounded education and building necessary skills, and I agree with this aspect of the literature review. Through my previous research experiences, I view beginning written expression to include multiple different skills. Additionally, I have come to recognize foundational skills that children possess that are building blocks to written expression. Sometimes these skills are demonstrated verbally, rather than in written form; however, these skills still demonstrate growth in written expression. My literature review has also helped me to understand the personal biases of teachers against written expression, and the potential impact of bias against written expression. I will be studying teachers of earlier grades than much of the research that is currently available; however, I believe that the results will be similar. To ensure that my opinions does not impact the nature of the interviews or the data analysis procedures I will be careful to avoid leading questions, to not respond verbally or non-verbally to teachers in a manner that might indicate rejection or approval, and to interpret the data at face value. I will be aware of preconceived notions, which will allow me to bracket them. I expect to find responses from teachers that are similar to the literature that I have read on this subject.

Participants

Use of the term *participants* indicates that those participating in the study have chosen to do so willingly and have ethically been chosen to take part in the study (Merriam, 2009). By requiring the specific criteria described below, I was better able to ensure that these individuals had actually experienced the phenomenon that I studied. In addition, I ensured that they had experienced a phenomenon that was somewhat similar to

each of the other participants in the study. Participants may have interpreted these experiences differently, but still had the same foundational experience. By using these criteria I was able to recruit individuals who best informed me about the phenomenon that I studied (Creswell, 2013).

Reaching saturation. Dukes (1984) reports that in order to gain a wide enough range of perspectives in phenomenological research, the sample size should be between three and ten participants. The primary indicator of adequate sample size is that saturation has been reached and the indicators of saturation are generally determined based on the quality of the research gathered by the researcher (Morse, 1995). Saturation occurs when the researcher finds themes that have repeated themselves and no new information about the phenomenon is found (Morse, 1995). Morse (1995) further states that saturation is reached more easily in qualitative research when the sample and purpose of the research are clearly defined. The final sample size will thus be determined based on the quality of information gathered from the participants and the indicators of saturation. This study included seven participants.

Sample and setting. Participants for this study were selected using criterion-sampling, which is commonly used in phenomenological research (Creswell, 2013). Criterion sampling was appropriate because all of the participants were targeted for participation due to experiencing the same phenomena. Participants were also recruited through convenience from small school districts where I am familiar with other school employees. The school where the participants were gathered was a rural school district on the Eastern Plains of Colorado. The criteria for participation include teaching in a general education classroom in grades kindergarten through second grade, teaching for at least

two years, using the current curriculum or method for at least one year, and having a dedicated writing class period. The writing class period must be above and beyond the writing that is done for other academic subjects. These criteria were chosen to ensure that the participants had similar experiences and that they were describing the same phenomena to me during the interviews. Additionally, it helped to ensure that an observation of a written expression lesson could be completed. A classroom incentive will be offered to participants in the form of $20 gift certificates for classroom books.

Data Collection

Creswell (2013) states that data should be collected from multiple sources through interrelated activities to gather a rich collection of information that answers the research questions the researcher has created. In the present study data will be collected through interviews, observation, and artifact review. The purpose of the current study was to examine in depth the instructional decision making process of teachers before and during written expression instruction, as well as to understand teacher's perspectives of instructing written expression.

After I received approval from the University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board (see Appendix G) I began to recruit participants and gained approval from the school district. Initial contact with the school district was made through a school employee who I was familiar with. This contact person was then able to assist me in connecting with other appropriate personnel in the school. Once I have contacted participants, they will each complete informed consent (see Appendix F) prior to participation in this study.

Pre-observation interview. Data collection included three primary steps that when combined, all examined one specific lesson administered by each participant. The first task to be completed was a semi-structured in person individual interview prior to the lesson administration and observation. This interview will lasted approximately 30 minutes. The protocol to be used for the interview can be found in Appendix B. At this time I will asked the teacher about the lesson planning process for the lesson that I later videotaped, the theoretical basis for the teachers' decision making process, personal beliefs about written expression (i.e., development of written expression, knowledge of literature, methods of teaching) and the initial plans for the class-wide written expression lesson. This interview was audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. The purpose of this task was to gain an understanding of the teachers' decision making process in determining the content, activities, teaching methods, and homework that students will complete during the writing lesson.

Observation. The second task to be completed was to videotape the administration of the written expression lesson that was discussed in the initial interview. The purpose of video recording the lesson was to later watch selected sections of the videotape with the teacher to compare the actual lesson given to the lesson initially planned by the teacher. During the observation, the video camera was pointed towards the teacher to primarily capture the teacher's behaviors and instructional practices. Additionally, the observation allowed me to evaluate classroom organization and opportunities for participation. The observation protocol can be found in Appendix C.

Post-observation interview. The final task completed was an in person semi-structured individual interview with each teacher after the lesson was administered. This

interview will last approximately 30 minutes. I viewed sections of the videotaped lesson with the teacher and asked her about any discrepancies between the initial lesson plan and the events that actually took place during the lesson. The protocol for the post-observation interview can be found in Appendix D. This helped me to better understand why the teacher made instructional decisions during the lesson and the factors that impacted the lesson while it was happening.

Confidentiality. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. All references to participants were made through pseudonym, including transcripts provided to the research assistant. All data, including transcriptions, videos, and anecdotal notes, will be stored on my personal password protected computer. No one had access to the videos, transcriptions, and anecdotal notes except for the research assistant, my research advisor, and me.

Data organization. During the pre-observation interview, observation, and post-observation interview I followed an interview or observation protocol, which detailed the necessary demographic information to be gathered as well as the semi-structured questions I used to guide my interviews (Creswell, 2013). The interview protocol increased the likelihood of consistency among questions, while the semi-structured nature allowed for necessary changes to be made to each interview based on the participant's behavior and responses (Creswell, 2013). The protocol used for the observation detailed information such as the classroom arrangement, length of activities in the lesson, list of activities in the lesson, opportunities for students to respond, and target skill of the lesson. Immediately following the videotaped observations and interviews I also recorded field notes related to the session, which served to explain the setting of the classroom

environment, unique events that occurred during the lesson, or any problems that may have arisen that could compromise the integrity of the data gathered. Artifacts in the form of student work were also gathered. Using multiple methods to gather data in this study allowed me to richly answer the research questions and to triangulate the data, increasing the trustworthiness of the study (Silverman, 2010).

Data Analysis

Merriam (2009) states that unlike other aspects of qualitative research, prescriptive data analysis methods have been formulated. Data analysis in qualitative research is a cyclical process during which I used the data I collected to help me better collect future data, as well as answer the research questions. Data were gathered and analyzed simultaneously. The purpose of organizing qualitative data is to be able to draw meaning from the data, make comparisons between participants, find patterns, cluster information and confirm the information that has been gathered (Creswell, 2013). Similarly, Merriam states that the purpose of data analysis in qualitative research is to find meaning within the data and this process involve multiple steps. She further states that the data analysis process should lead to answers to the initial research questions.

Sources of data to be analyzed. In this study several sources of data were analyzed. The artifacts to be analyzed will include photocopies of student worksheets, instructional materials, and field notes written by me. Anecdotal notes were also taken about the tone of voice used, the topic areas interviewees gravitate towards or avoid, and any unique aspects of the interview. The interview transcriptions and protocols were coded and analyzed to find common themes among the participants. A research assistant and I both code and analyze the transcriptions, protocols, and artifacts. By including a

research assistant I was able to increase the trustworthiness of the codes and themes derived. Additionally, any relevant information from each interview was used to better structure subsequent interviews.

Finding codes and themes. Through ongoing data analysis concurrent with collecting data, I was able to make adjustments to future interviews and observations to improve subsequent data collection processes (Merriam, 2009). Immediately when data were transcribed I began to organize it in to Microsoft Word files so that codes could be derived from the information. Each participant has a unique Microsoft Word file containing all of the transcriptions related to that participant.

In order to analyze the data, primarily bottom up analysis was used because codes and themes will be created based on the data, rather than sorting the data in to preexisting codes and themes. “Coding is nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data” (Merriam, 2009, p.173). I used single words or short phrases while coding all aspects of my data (i.e., transcripts, observations, and artifacts), although other types of codes could have been used based on the researcher’s preference. The codes were organized by inserting electronic comments in to each of the transcripts in Microsoft Word. The documents were then printed and analyzed through cutting and sorting the data. Codes are considered to be the “heart” of the data analysis process; however not every piece of the data will be used in the coding process (Creswell, 2013).

Only the pieces of data related to the research questions were aggregated in to codes and later themes. Creswell (2013) suggests using no more than 25-30 codes, followed by only five to seven themes. To form themes, multiple similar codes were

combined together to represent larger concepts derived from the data. By examining the codes used for all transcripts, I was able to see the commonly occurring codes and themes. When working with the research assistant to develop themes, I worked towards consensus of themes to ensure that the data were analyzed similarly by both of us.

Organization of data files. Using Microsoft Word files of the transcripts, the research assistant and I independently wrote corresponding codes. Codes corresponded to the research questions I asked, and irrelevant information was not be coded. Following the coding process, the research assistant and I each independently create themes based on the codes that we had created. These themes were then compared to determine the similarities and differences that we have each found in the data. The purpose of this process was to determine the information that was most relevant to the questions that I asked and to capture the essence of the information provided by the participants.

Trustworthiness

Unlike quantitative methods, qualitative data is interpreted by the researcher rather than using numerical statistical procedures. In qualitative research trustworthiness refers to the quality of work, similar to reliability and validity in quantitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Additionally, the terms validation, verification, credibility, confirmability, dependability, objectivity, generalizability and many others are sometimes used synonymously with trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman 2011). At times, some of these words are referred to as types of trustworthiness and other researchers may use them to refer to overarching trustworthiness. Despite the variations in terminology, each of the words generally has the same meaning, which is to rigorously gather data; however, Merriam (2009) states that rigorous research may be

different for each type of qualitative research. Multiple tasks will be completed to ensure trustworthiness while conducting this study. Additionally, qualitative research includes different types of trustworthiness which are detailed below.

Credibility. Three components to trustworthiness are generally used in qualitative research, including credibility, dependability, and transferability. Credibility in qualitative research is similar to internal consistency in quantitative research because it is examining the consistency between the true experience of the participant and the experience described by the researcher (Merriam, 2009). I increased the credibility of the data through reflexivity be examining my personal stance on the subject matter and examining my perspective of the interview process by creating a researcher journal (Creswell, 2013). Triangulation (Creswell, 2013) was used to increase credibility by way of gathering data from multiple sources, including different participants and different sources of data. Berg (2009) describes triangulation as a process of using multiple lines of sight to more accurately lead to the truth. He further explains the importance of using multiple methods of data collection to increase the likelihood of understanding the true essence of the experience examined through a research study. In addition, a research assistant was included in data analysis to demonstrate similar interpretations of the data by multiple researchers.

Dependability. The second component to trustworthiness is dependability. Dependability is similar to credibility because both examine the similarities between the data gathered and the interpretations formed. In addition, triangulation is used in the same way to enhance dependability as it is used to enhance credibility. In order to enhance dependability further, an audit trail was created to provide a description of data collection

process, code derivation, and the theme decision making process (Merriam, 2009). The audit trail also included the codes and themes created by both the research assistant and me. Previously, I explained my researcher stance on the topic of study, and this explanation also increases the dependability of this study because I have bracketed my personal perspectives on this subject (Merriam, 2009). Finally, I conducted a member check by providing the participants with a PDF version of the themes derived from each interview and then ask each participant to verify that the information provided during the interviews to ensure it is not misinterpreted (Merriam, 2009). Each participant was provided with a document unique to them, including only the relevant themes that they provided during the interview, rather than all themes that have been developed by data from all participants.

Transferability. Transferability is the third component of trustworthiness in qualitative research. Merriam (2009) states that transferability in qualitative research is similar to generalizability in quantitative research, although generalization is not the purpose of qualitative research. Transferability can be made possible by using rich, thick descriptions of the settings, participants and findings (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, Merriam states that the reader is responsible for determining other situations and settings that the data can be generalized to based on the description of the setting and sample provided by the researcher. Transferability can be increased by creating a sample that includes a wide range of participants within the predetermined criteria. By providing sufficient descriptions of the setting, participants and findings and including maximum variation in the sample, I increased the transferability of the study. By using all of these methods the trustworthiness of this study has been increased; however, the purpose of

qualitative research is not to generalize information, but rather to explain the experiences and meaning of those experiences of the participants.

Summary

Through this chapter, I have explained the need for this study and the purpose that it served to expand the current literature base. In addition, the research design, methodology, and trustworthiness have been explained in detail. The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of early elementary school teachers' instructional decision making related to written expression. Using a constructivist phenomenological research design allowed me to richly understand the experiences of participants. The methodology of this study ensured that the data gathered was useful and contributes meaningfully to the literature. The data were then established as trustworthy through methods of credibility, dependability, and transferability.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This study had two primary goals. The first goal of this phenomenology was to explore the experiences of teachers while instructing written expression to children in grades kindergarten through second grade. The second goal was to understand teachers' foundational thought knowledge bases and decision making processes. Two primary research questions were examined in this study:

Q1 What is the foundational decision making system for teacher's decisions in selecting instructional content and strategies for beginning writing?

Q2 What thought process guides teachers in selecting content and the different methods and strategies used during written expression lessons?

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. The first is to explain the participants and setting of the study. The second purpose of this chapter is to describe the data contributing to the themes created.

Participants

The participants included seven teachers from a small, rural school district on the Eastern Plains of Colorado. All teachers taught in the same school. Two kindergarten teachers, three first grade teachers, and two second grade teachers participated. All the teachers were female. Each of the participants met the requirements of teaching in a general education classroom in kindergarten through second grade, teaching for at least two years, using the current methods or strategies for at least one year, and having a dedicated writing class period during the school day. In addition, all participants appeared

to be open to sharing about their experiences teaching writing. Each shared personal strengths and weaknesses related to written expression instructional practices and general teaching experiences. All teachers willingly agreed to participate in the study, and no participants declined to answer questions or requested to stop participation at any time. In addition, most participants asked questions about the research, demonstrating interest in the data collection process. Furthermore, some participants indicated that they personally or the school as a whole was attempting to improve the writing skills of students. To protect confidentiality, a pseudonym was assigned to each of the participants and all participants will be referred to only by pseudonym. Each of the participants described her experiences and perspectives of written expression instruction in light of the grade level that she teaches. While the specific grade level expectations increased in difficulty as students aged, teachers described their experiences based on the k2grade level of instruction.

The participants ranged in age from mid-twenties to mid-fifties and in years of teaching experience from 2 to 16 years, with an average of 7 years of experience. One of the teachers had earned a master's degree in a literacy related field, while all others held bachelor's degrees in elementary education or early childhood education.

The school where the data were collected will be referred to as North Elementary School (NES). The community NES is located in has a population of less than 5,000 residents. Additionally, the town has a median household income of less than half of the Colorado state average (www.city-data.com, 2014). Regarding the kindergarten through second grade students, 76.6% are Hispanic and 21.7% are white or Caucasian (Colorado Department of Education, 2015). Nearly 87% of students in NES qualify for free or

reduced lunch (Colorado Department of Education, 2015). According to the Colorado Department of Education, 6.7% of students in the school district which NES is part of were English Language Learners during the 2014-2015 school year.

An additional characteristic of North Elementary School is the lack of a writing curriculum. The teachers indicated that while the school formerly had a contract and formally used the Writing Alive curriculum, this was no longer in place. Many of the teachers continued to use aspects of this curriculum because they had received some training in it. Currently, the teachers were instructed to follow the Common Core standards for writing, but were not given any additional explicit direction on how to follow the Common Core. Teachers then collaborated with one another to determine all aspects of the lessons, as long as each aspect of the Common Core was taught during the appropriate school year. This model allowed a significant amount of freedom for teachers to make decisions, but also required that teachers be prepared to take on this level of freedom. Because of the lack of a curriculum and the freedom for decision making within North Elementary School, no curriculum map was available from the teachers. At times, this created confusion for teachers in determining the necessary skills students need to develop to be prepared for the subsequent grade level. In addition, the teachers were not required to create written lesson plans. The teachers interviewed most often had a few short phrases or individual words as guides for lessons.

Two kindergarten teachers participated in this study, Carol and Elizabeth. Carol indicated that the target skill for the end of kindergarten is for each student to be able to write two complete sentences independently. Carol was a veteran teacher who taught at the school for the past 9 years. She first taught third grade at a neighboring school district

for 5 years. Carol had a paraprofessional in her classroom during most of the school day. During writing lessons, Carol would often have two groups of students requiring specific support and the remainder of the students would work independently or with a partner. The students requiring specific support would work with Carol or the paraprofessional at a small table in the classroom. During the observation, Carol had a group of students struggling with punctuation, while her paraprofessional had a group of students working on legibility. Carol was Hispanic and a Spanish speaker; however, she was not heard using Spanish in the classroom with any of her students. She did not discuss the impact of being a Hispanic teacher on her instruction, but this did make her more demographically similar to most of the students in the school Carol spoke with a strong, confident voice and complimented the other teachers in the school. She shared that she does not personally enjoy writing and she shared that thinks her students "mirror" her dislike for writing. Carol indicated that her current students are less enthusiastic about writing and complete the requirements for writing, but do not "push themselves" to be better writers. Carol described written expression as,

> What it means most to me is the written form of spoken words and that's what they begin to realize what it is in kindergarten. Is what is written down on paper is what somebody thought in their brain or what somebody spoke and somebody else wrote down. And that anything that they could speak to somebody is something that they could potentially write as sentences or a story.

Elizabeth's classroom was next door to Carol's. Elizabeth was the newest teacher in the study and the only teacher to share that she did not collaborate with other teachers in the school. Elizabeth was also Hispanic, but she did not discuss her Spanish language skills. Elizabeth had worked at this school for one year. While interviewing Elizabeth, she periodically made off the cuff comments about the school. She did not explicitly state

that she was unhappy working at this school, but stated that she would not continue to work there after the completion of the school year. Although Elizabeth appeared to be unhappy with her current employment, she shared that she enjoyed writing personally and enjoyed instructing writing. Similar to Carol, Elizabeth also had a paraprofessional in her classroom. Elizabeth utilized this person in a similar way to Carol. Students who needed extra support in a specific area worked with either Elizabeth or the paraprofessional in a small group. Additionally, Elizabeth shared that she sometimes required students struggling to attend to whole class information sit with the paraprofessional at a table at the back of the classroom. The paraprofessional would then simultaneously teach the lesson to the individual student(s). Elizabeth defined written expression as,

> I guess written expression would be being able to convey your thought process through writing. Using correct grammar and usage so somebody else can understand it. And then kindergarten, at the beginning of the year like literally for half of the year it's pictures, they can't write and now it's two complete sentences, so subject/verb, preposition phrases.

The kindergarten teachers were the only teachers to indicate that they did not plan their written expression lessons together. Subsequently, the two classes were completing different writing assignments. Carol's class was focusing on a writing target that stated 'using a checklist with a teacher or partner'. The purpose of the activity during Carol's observation was for each student to write two sentences about something they did the day before. The students were then to check the mechanics of their product with a checklist provided by Carol. Elizabeth's students were writing about Dinosaurs, and the goal for the lesson was for each student to write two sentences. She read the students a book about dinosaurs and wrote sample sentences on the SmartBoard. Each student was to copy any

two sentences from the board on his or her own paper. Carol and Elizabeth did not follow similar lesson plans in writing at all.

Anne, Betty, and Gabby were first grade teachers and all were Caucasian. The expectation for students at the end of first grade was to be able to write a five sentence paragraph. Anne was also a new teacher, although slightly more experienced than Elizabeth. She had taught for three years, all in first grade and all in the same school. Anne stated that she personally enjoyed writing, especially when she was in high school. During the classroom observation she laughed and joked with her students. When discussing writing instruction, Anne indicated that she lacked confidence. Anne stated that written expression is,

> Written expression to me is just being able to put thoughts into words in a comprehensive sentence. For first graders it's really a long process that goes from the beginning of the year just barely being able to understand what a complete sentence is to by the end of the year understanding that you can use voice and you can make you sentences a little more interesting but for first graders that should be seven or eight word sentences with some figurative language in there. About a five sentence paragraph.

Betty had been teaching for 16 years, all in the same school. She began her teaching career as a Title 1 teacher for two years, and this position included reading and math support for kindergarten through second grade students. Next, Betty taught second grade for two years. For the prior 12 years she taught first grade. Betty appeared to be confident in her instruction of writing. Although she was the most experienced of the first grade teachers, she indicated that she improved her own lessons by collaborating with the other first grade teachers. Betty stated that written expression is,

> Written expression to me is being able to I guess put your thoughts down on paper whether it's simple, first grade sentences, being able to make sure the words are in the right order, does it makes sense, can you read it back.

Gabby was the only participant with a master's degree, which she had earned recently. Her master's degree was in a literacy related field. Gabby was also the only teacher to begin her career as an educator later in adulthood, after raising her children. Gabby described herself as a "late bloomer". Gabby had only taught at this school in her career and had been teaching for 7 years. Gabby completed a research project for her master's degree which focused on improving the writing skills of first grade students. Gabby completed the research project with the students in her classroom, and it focused on altering her teaching practices to include increased amounts of peer learning. Anne, Betty, and Gabby did not typically have assistance in their classrooms by paraprofessionals or volunteers. Gabby described written expression by stating,

> I think written expression is you write so someone can read it. If it's not clear, then therefore they can't read it, so, our goal for first graders, at least my goal is, children are able to write something that's readable and of course the printing is clear enough but then of course the sentence makes sense so someone can read it. That's what I tell them all the time. We write so someone can read it.

All of the first grade teachers prepared the lesson plans for the week regarding cool jobs. The students were expected to each create a short paragraph about a cool job they personally selected. The teachers anticipated that this might be more difficult for the students compared to previous writing tasks, because it was informational in nature, rather than a personal narrative. In addition, each student was instructed to select his or her idea for a cool job and select two tasks that a person with that job would do. The requirements for students required more independence than previous writing tasks.

Diane and Fiona were the two second grade teachers. Fiona stated that second grade students are expected to expand their sentences by creating compound sentences

and increasing the level of description. Diane taught for one year in preschool and two years in second grade, which had all been at North Elementary School. She typically had a parent volunteer in her classroom during her writing lessons. Diane was Caucasian and she was a soft spoken teacher. Diane indicated that she had not received very much instruction in her teacher training program regarding writing instruction. Diane defined written expression as,

> So, with written expression they need to have proper writing skills, convention, grammar, correct grammar usage and knowing basically the correct writing format.

Fiona had been teaching for 16 years, all in North Elementary School. She taught Title 1, kindergarten, first grade, and second grade. Fiona taught second grade for about 7 years, although not consecutively. Generally, Fiona did not have a paraprofessional or volunteer in her classroom during instructional periods. Fiona was animated and confident during the interviews and classroom observation. She expressed strong opinions about written expression instruction and was direct with her instructions to her students. Fiona was Hispanic and a Spanish speaker. She was not heard using Spanish with her students, but similar to Carol and Elizabeth, many of her students were also Hispanic. When asked to define written expression, Fiona stated,

> I think it's mostly taking a child's thought and putting it on paper. It's about them….I think that's mostly what it is, in written expression because there is so many different kinds of writing, we do informational writing, and research writing we do so many different kinds of writing. But as for the expression, that's just their thoughts.

Diane and Fiona planned their written expression lessons together. The lesson completed during the observation was part of a long-term project students were working on. The task assigned to the students was to research and write about an animal. This

lesson has been used in previous school years, but Diane indicated that it had been improved this year, because students were provided with specific questions to answer while researching. Students completed this project at different rates and were given the opportunity to complete it with partners. The project included a few drafts before typing a final product and drawing a large animal to match the written report.

Each of these participants shared information about her classroom, her personal educational experiences, her students, and her opinions of classroom instruction. All teachers also showed examples of the graphic organizers and homework assignments that she used in her classroom. The information provided by each of these participants contributed to the creation of the themes described below.

Data Organization and Representation

Participants in this study completed two semi-structured interviews, and one classroom observation was conducted with each to explore the participants' perspectives of and experiences related to written expression instruction. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim prior to code and theme determination. Each interview transcription was in a unique Microsoft Word document. Codes were then created in the documents. The codes were then typed in to each of the interview documents as "comments." Each of the transcripts was then printed, and the kitchen table method was used to determine themes and fully evaluate the data collected. Specifically, the transcripts were cut and sorted.

To ensure trustworthiness of the data, several measures were taken. The data were collected from multiple sources. A researcher journal was developed throughout the data collection and organization procedures. The researcher journal describes my personal

reflections on the research process. In addition, an audit trail was created to describe the course taken to select the codes and themes. In addition, a research assistant also created codes and themes which were then compared with the codes and themes I created to increase the likelihood of accuracy in data representation. Lastly, participants were provided with the themes developed and completed a member check. These procedures assisted in increasing the trustworthiness of the data.

The observations were digitally recorded and transferred to my personal computer. Some of the artifacts were paper copies of documents provided by participants, and others were digital photographs taken and transferred to my personal computer. The interview data were the primary source used to create the codes and themes. The observation data were used primarily to inform the post-observation interview. Artifacts were used to support the interview data.

I analyzed participant's responses, artifacts and observations to determine emergent themes. Bottom up analysis was used to create the codes and themes, which allowed me to create the codes based on the data, rather than sorting the data in to preexisting codes and themes. Merriam stated, "Coding is nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data" (2009, p. 173). Codes with a similar essence were then categorized together to create the themes. Initially, seven themes were created from the data analysis and no subthemes were used. This has been adjusted to include four primary themes, with two of the primary themes including subthemes. By combining the original themes to create larger themes with subthemes I was better able to use the

themes to describe a linear process regarding instructional decision making. These themes and subthemes are described throughout this chapter.

Using a constructivist theoretical framework, I pieced together the lived experiences of the participants to create meaning, which led to the development of the themes. In addition, unique experiences of participants are described throughout this chapter. While creating the themes, significant statements were identified that would be used to illustrate the themes throughout this chapter. After the themes were created I matched the themes with the research questions based on which research question each theme answered. The themes created encompass the large, overarching topics that the interviews and observations focused on. The phenomenological perspective of this study dictates that data gathered should be combined to understand the general essence of all participants' experiences (Spezial & Carpenter, 2007).

Description of Themes

Four themes emerged from the codes derived from the data. These themes include: (1) I am guided by a system, (2) Trial and error, (3) First, we plan, and (4) I make adjustments as I go. Themes 1 and 2 answer research question 1. Themes 3 and 4 answer research question 2. First, we plan has two accompanying subthemes, (3a) We work together and (3b) Using the five senses. In addition, I make adjustments as I go includes three subthemes, which are (4a) Managing it all, (4b) Teaching them to do it on their own, and (4c) Taking cues from students. Each of these themes explains various circumstances that impact the thought processes used by teachers when selecting the content and strategies to be used during written expression lessons. The participants

indicated that these five themes impacted each person's thought process while instruction writing and while planning writing lessons.

Themes 1 and 2 answer research question 1, because they describe the foundational decision making systems incorporated by teachers when selecting content and instructional strategies for written expression lessons. The foundational decision making system for teachers is different from the thought process guiding instruction, because it is an underlying mind-set developed by teachers. The thought processes employed by teachers are variable and circumstantial. The themes below are most effectively described without being bound by the research questions while discussing the phenomena of written expression instruction and decision making.

Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I will summarize the information provided by participants which contribute to each of these themes. Specific examples and quotes from participants are provided to explain the development of each theme. The primary source of data for creation of these themes is the interviews conducted with the seven participants. The observations and first interview served to inform the second interview conducted with each participant. The artifacts gathered supported the data gathered during the interviews and provide a visual aid to better explain the descriptions of activities provided by participants.

I Am Guided By a System

The following two themes describe the underlying foundational decision making systems that the participants developed throughout their teacher training programs and experience working as educators. Teachers' thought processes related to instructional decision making were impacted by themes 3 and 4, described later in this chapter, and

these are continually changing aspects of the classroom environment. The two themes described below are different, because they are over-arching belief systems that have been developed by the participants over time. These belief systems underlie the thought processes used by teachers during classroom instruction. One of the interesting aspects of this theme is that the teachers are required to use the Common Core standards when instructing; however, they are not required to use the Writing Alive curriculum, but still chose to incorporate elements of this in to writing lessons.

Participants reported two primary foundational belief systems that guide the instructional decision making process during written expression lessons. The first system described by participants was structured programs or trainings. These contributed to the development of foundational decision making systems through experiences such as training in the Writing Alive curriculum. The second system was learning from personal experience or the experience of colleagues. These two belief systems are similar, because they were developed by participants over time and underlie the decision making process of teachers throughout their instructional practices; however, they differ because the first contributes to a belief system created through organized means, while the second is created trial and error of lived experiences.

The two primary decision structured decision making systems that participants reported using to guide instructional decision making were Writing Alive and the Common Core standards. These systems guided teachers both in *how* to teach written expression, as well as *what* to teach during written expression lessons. Fiona described her experience with training to use the Writing Alive curriculum, several years prior:

> A lady would come once or twice a month…and teach us different parts of the program. It's a huge program, it's a big binder. And she'd go through

> the whole Writing Alive sentence piece by piece. So we would learn a little piece, talk about it. Train on it. Practice it on the class. She would demonstrate with the class what it should look like.

The Common Core standards are primarily considered to guide instructional decision making for the participants in regard to *what* is taught during written expression. The participants indicated that they follow the Common Core to ensure that necessary information was taught at each grade level is addressed. Many of the participants then match the standards from the Common Core to activities they previously taught. They used activities they or colleagues taught previously, to meet the required instructional material from the Common Core. Fiona referred to the Common Core standards as the 'documents'.

> Fiona: It is….it's reached the point where it became a resource and so we can teach however we want according to the documents, we have to follow the documents and so it's a resource for our document. And so what we have done….when they purchased the program [Writing Alive] and when we were trained, we had to exactly what they said, how they said it. Now, we'll take the same idea and we'll adapt it to fit our document and to fit what we expect from our kids. And so we've changed the rubric….this year we have really changed how we teach… We have not had any new training. So that's what we're stuck on. Until we went to our documents…when they started telling us how to teach the documents we had to figure out how does this fit into what we have to teach. And just even last year we weren't teaching the document fully because when we read it again, "Oh, this says we have to teach different kinds of writing that we've never taught"…so with Writing Alive you teach sentence structure and you teach paragraph writing but in the document it would say like a 'how-to'. Different things that we were not required to teach with Writing Alive.

Some participants also reported that they had received training in instructing writing through in-service presentations or with a writing coach. In addition, most reported that they did not have any training in written expression instruction while in their teacher training programs. Gabby stated that she was trained in written expression

instruction during her graduate training program, which was in a literacy related field. Fiona indicated that she sought out experiences to improve her written expression instruction and said,

> Along with just research and I always do my own little research to help me improve, like I've looked at Four Square Writing and I've looked at different kinds of, things that our district doesn't teach but things that have helped me understand it better.

Using a structured system to guide the decision making process in instructing written expression provides an outline for teachers that comes with empirical support to indicate it is likely to be successful. When teachers do not have the ability to use a system to guide them in instructing written expression, the alternative decision making process may not have any empirical support to indicate that it will lead to student success.

Trial and Error

While some teachers had formalized, systematic instruction in teaching written expression, all teachers valued the personal experiences they had to develop belief systems about writing. All participants reported that they have, at least in part, learned to instruct written expression through trial and error. These practices developed in to foundational decision making systems for teachers because they took place consistently over time. Through their own experience and experiences of colleagues, teachers created ingrained belief systems about instructing written expression and student development of skills.

Primarily, teachers stated that they learned from their own experiences, and to a lesser degree, from the experiences of colleagues. One of the reasons that teachers reported learning from their own experience or experiences of colleagues is that they lack formal training in written expression instruction. Anne reported, "I don't really feel like I

had much preparation in college as far as actual, applicable skills. It was theory and classroom management and techniques." Carol stated, "So lots of times I'll just think about 'well, when I did this before, what worked before?'" This statement indicated that she relied on her past experiences with various lessons to improve or adapt lessons to the current class of students.

Although Diane only taught for a few years, she indicated that her teaching practice had improved over time. Additionally, she believed that she learned from her own experience teaching and used her past teaching experiences to inform her future practice.

> Diane: I've taught a lot better this year, probably because of my experience. My first year, not giving myself enough time to be able to teach it and then I felt like I was rushing through it and I didn't explain it as well and give the clear expectations. So then classroom management fell apart, everything else fell apart. It was awful. And that pretty much sums up, I don't think the classroom management was horrible, but it could have been a lot better if I would have gave clearer expectations and if I knew where I was going. This year I kind of know my own expectations as a teacher and I know the standards that are there, so it's a lot better this year.

Teachers reported that they improve lessons from year to year, which primarily includes using the same lesson structure, but changing the activities in the lesson to match the current class of students. Participants who have taught for several years are able to draw on their own experiences to improve their own practice, but teachers who are lacking experience reported depending more on the experience of colleagues to make instructional decisions. Betty compared her early written expression teaching practice to her current practice. She said, "I do feel comfortable, yeah. I don't even remember if I modeled ever. I don't know. I don't know if I just went like, "there you go!" I have more tools now definitely." Experienced teachers may have developed patterns of instruction

more likely to be successful because they have a wider range of experiences to draw from.

First, We Plan

The instructional decision making process of the participants in this study began with the choice to plan lessons that would connect to one another over time. Participants, except Elizabeth, reported doing this with the other same grade level teachers. Generally, this planning took place on Wednesday for the coming week. At this time, the teachers collaborated to create potential visual aids to use, writing planners to show students, and selected possible books that could be used to prime student background knowledge. Because Elizabeth did not engage in this scheduled planning time with the other kindergarten teachers, she was not bound to the same level of preparedness. Carol relied on the other kindergarten teacher, not Elizabeth, because she struggled to instruct writing. She said,

> For me, the struggle with writing is that there is no sequential laid out plan, "This is how you're going to do it. You're going to teach this and this" and for me, that's been the struggle.

Through collaborative planning, most teachers chose to include a variety of activities for students including multi-sensory learning. Betty described the collaborative planning process in first grade by stating,

> When we're planning like our team meetings for planning, we choose the topic and we like it to connect with reading or science or social studies. And so we do come up with that but then it's pretty much Writing Alive.

Diane described this process more generally for the second grade students stating,

> Well, when we plan we usually as a whole grade level so we do team planning. So the whole second grade would meet, and we'd talk about what our student's needs would be and we would kind of discuss where

> we need to go next. And we would use our standards (Common Core standards) to drive our instruction.

The following two themes, We work together and Using the five senses describe the initial planning teachers completed to determine what information would be taught during written expression lessons and how it would be taught.

We work together. The instructional decision making thought process of the participants was influenced by collaboration by colleagues. When making instructional decisions to plan future lessons, most participants valued the input of colleagues. Anne stated, "….all the training that I've gotten has just been kind of what [same grade level teacher] has told me to do." Six out of the seven participants described collaboration with colleagues as an important aspect of teaching writing. Diane took a proactive approach to learning from her colleagues and said, "I didn't have too much training in writing, kind of led by basically examples from my coworkers here. I would go and observe them and bring what I had observed in to my own teaching." Additionally, when making instructional decisions about written expression lessons, teachers reportedly valued peer learning for students in the same way they value peer learning for themselves. The majority of the participants emphasized the importance of students learning through peer activities, such as peer editing.

Due to all of the participants coming from the same school, part of the reason for grade level collaboration with colleagues was that it was a common activity in the school culture; however, it was not required of teachers. Most participants reported that they planned activities with the other grade level teachers (three total) to ensure consistency across the grade level and to learn from other teacher's ideas. The typical structure of the collaborative meetings between teachers included identifying the target(s) that would be

taught during the next week, identifying the theme that students would practice writing about (i.e., animals, space, etc.), and creating visual aids that would be used during the lessons, if needed (e.g., graphic organizer).

Diane indicated that although she enjoyed collaborating with same grade level colleagues, she also adapted lessons to the unique needs of her students. “We can look at our own individual kids’ needs and see what they need, and then we can direct them during small group time.” Diane built an initial, foundational lesson with her colleagues and made changes as she saw fit. Most of the participant’s initial thought process regarding lessons was influenced by collaboration with her colleagues, but they each also took cues from their own students to further adapt the lesson to meet classroom needs.

In addition to the consistent collaborative planning among teachers, participants also reportedly reached out to others when they needed assistance with a particularly challenging lesson or with a lesson students struggled to comprehend. Participants described sharing successful lessons that they taught. Carol indicated that she collaborated with other teachers when they experience challenges and success:

> I know we do [seek support from others when struggling]. And maybe not necessarily when we’re always stuck but…we also share really good lessons, if I do something that came out really good, I’ll go and tell them about it and if they need something later (sic). But, definitely, if we’re struggling or if we need help or need an idea, we definitely collaborate.

Elizabeth was the only participant to state that she did not consistently collaborate with any colleagues, although she periodically consulted with her paraprofessional. Elizabeth stated that she believed the teachers at her North Elementary School had teaching methods that were very different from hers, because she was a new teacher and the other kindergarten teachers had taught for several years. Elizabeth often used

websites, such as Pinterest, to find ideas for lessons she would instruct, which was not common among the other teachers in the school. Elizabeth compared her experience at this school to the school where she student taught. She preferred the collaboration at that school, compared to collaboration at her current school. Elizabeth described her independent work by stating:

> My methods are so new compared to everyone here because I'm so much younger than everybody. That it just kind of, a lot of it I just do on my own that I feel I don't really share because they don't really care or want to do what I do, so who am I to say that they're doing it wrong, you know? And so I just do it on my own. If I have trouble with something that I don't know how to do, I go and ask them and then they give me their ideas and some of their ideas I make my own but I'm pretty independent. I mean, I kind of do everything on my own. But it's a big shock from where I was to here. It's completely different. It took me awhile just to figure how things work around here.

In addition to teachers choosing to collaborate with one another to plan lessons, most teachers also valued students learning from one another. The activities that teachers reported using during peer learning included peer editing, collaborative writing projects, and brief peer sharing activities (e.g., Author's Chair). Additionally, teachers helped students learn from one another during whole class lessons. For example, a teacher would call on a strong writer first to share an answer with the whole class so that other students had an example of a correct answer. Elizabeth stated, "I started out with my higher kids because I want them to model for my lower kids." Fiona reported that students in her class have different personal life experiences, and students with fewer enriching experiences can not draw from personal experiences during writing. She believed that students could gain from the enriching life experiences of other students when learning peer to peer.

> Fiona: But he was almost doing better work than [student], which has more language, more experiences than this one, his parents were both arrested for drug dealing, he lives with grandparents. And their work is about equal and that should not ever be, where [student], who has so many more experiences is showing the same kind of work as a child who goes through that.

Collaborative learning in written expression was important for teachers to use when they were struggling to determine how to teach a lesson. Additionally, participants valued sharing their successful lessons with other teachers. Similarly, teachers recognized the usefulness of collaborative learning for their students, in addition to for themselves. Written expression requires personal generation of ideas or connection to real-world experiences. By collaborating, students and teachers had the opportunity to draw from the experiences of others to enhance their own writing or writing instruction. Incorporating collaboration with colleagues in to the instructional decision making thought process opened teachers to new ideas generated by others.

Using the five senses. Teachers used a variety of aspects of the academic environment to guide the decisions made during instruction. Participants reported considering multi-sensory activities in the instructional decision making process to meet a variety of student needs and increase the likelihood that students will understand the information presented during the lessons.

Several years prior, the school where the data were collected used the Writing Alive curriculum exclusively. At the time of data collection, teachers chose how much of this curriculum to continue including in lessons. The Writing Alive curriculum includes multi-sensory cues in learning the writing process, such as tactile, visual, taste, and verbal cues. Different shapes and colors correspond to each part of speech. Green rectangles are subjects, purple triangles are verbs, red “watermelon slices” are objects, and pink clouds

are prepositional phrases (see Image 1). Most classrooms had posters on the walls depicting these parts of speech and the graphic organizers included the same shape usage. Additionally, many teachers were observed using small, colored, laminated shapes with these parts of speech to assist individuals or small groups of students who required step-by-step support in completing graphic organizers. The prior inclusion of the Writing Alive curriculum impacted the instructional decision making process of many teachers, because they were trained in this program, or had been mentored by other teachers who were trained in this program. Carol described using a multi-sensory approach to increasing her students' understanding of verbs by stating,

> And I think it's just because it's just an action lesson and because it's such, the actions that go with verbs are just fun. So, we also, at the beginning of the year, so like for green apple, we pull out green apple candy. For the verbs we bring purple grapes. And so they get to taste but then we also get up and move and talk about what a verb is.

Image 1. Writing Alive shapes and colors

For some teachers, like Carol, training had previously occurred in a multi-sensory approach to teaching written expression. Instructional decisions appeared to be impacted in part by multi-sensory activities, because teachers included them in lessons and were comfortable with them. In addition, participants shared a belief that students would learn from multi-sensory activities during written expression and benefit from learning through using a variety of activities. The underlying desire to use a multi-sensory approach to instruction impacted the thought process of teacher selection of activities to include in written expression lessons.

I Make Adjustments as I Go

Although most of the participants enjoyed collaboration with colleagues to prepare lessons in advance, as is typical in elementary school classrooms, adjustments were also frequently made during instruction. Teachers' thought processes for instruction were often impacted by unpredictability in the classroom. Anne described a recent lesson she had given that was very unpredictable. She had only three days in the week to organize her lesson, compared to the typical five. In addition, Anne did not anticipate the challenges that her students would experience. She expected that they would be able to complete the task independently, but they could not. Anne had to change her thought process regarding the lesson to ensure that her students were able to understand the material.

> I think it went okay. Monday's lesson was abysmally horrible so….for Betty, too, for all of us. So, we kind of re-did it when they came back from specials in about twenty minutes to where we usually do vocabulary and yesterday I did writing. I didn't have the planner (graphic organizer) down right and they didn't and we have like four kids in tears by the end of it. It was horrible. We kind of re-started over started over, I started my whole planner over and they just kind of erased what they needed to erase and so by the end of that time about half of them had actually finished their planner in a way that they could write from. So, then the lesson went better. It was really hard for them. And I told them, this was the first time that really they have had to everything and it's not piece by piece and it's not laid out, it's just a little tiny building block but then they have to add other stuff, too. So, a really hard time in there we're asking what they think but yesterday it went well. We did whole group for a while and then verbally rehearsed and I could send some kids to write, about eight of them at my table so about a third get it and we worked for quite a while and I think they're all done with their planners now.

Managing it all. Throughout all interviews, participants discussed the demands placed on them in the general education classroom environment which contributed to instructional decision making for written expression. The need to manage the classroom

environment influenced the thought process each teacher had regarding the instructional practices she could use to teach written expression to her students. Two factors significantly contributing to the choices made by teachers included time constraints and student engagement. To explain the challenge in managing student behavior, Diane said,

> I think what really threw the lesson off was that one child that was supposed to have the one-on-one aid, and the one-on-one aid was pulled to go cover pre-school, so she wasn't able to help during that time, and then the parent(classroom volunteer) is usually more active here during that time.

During the classroom observation, Diane was observed struggling with the student she describes above. In her lesson, students were completing different tasks as part of a large writing project. Diane shared that she was unsure of the part of the project each student was supposed to be completing and the next day, she had each student tell her this information prior to beginning independent work. This allowed her to be better aware of students on or off task behavior.

Participants described short-term time constraints, such as daily or weekly classroom needs, or year-long time constraints, such as meeting all academic standards that are required by the school district. Frequently, the participants reported that the school-wide calendar or daily schedule led to changes in the activities planned. For example, all of the first grade teachers stated that they typically plan lessons to connect to one another for five consecutive days, but due to the school-wide schedule, some weeks only contain three or four days. During such weeks, the teachers adapted lessons from previous school years to the time available in the current school year. Betty explained the daily time pressure she felt by stating,

> I knew that I wanted to be on time and sometimes that's, I felt like I needed to finish math on time. So it wasn't like, "Hurry up and start

> writing." So, they had like twenty full minutes after they transitioned and then they sat and the lights are off. Which is a pretty good chunk of time, so maybe that helped. Me being on time.

Betty generally had the ceiling lights off in her classroom during writing to create a different atmosphere for her students. To her, beginning the lesson on time would ensure that many of the students had the necessary time to fully complete the activity without pressure to rush through it.

Another time constraint that interrupted planned lessons was recognition that students were struggling to comprehend the information presented. Teachers believed the time pressure of meeting all the academic standards that must be addressed throughout the year, which caused a conflict between re-teaching difficult information and moving on to new information. They chose to either continue on with new lessons as planned even though some students were struggling to master the material, or chose to re-teach difficult lessons and risked running out of time at the end of the school year. When teaching written expression, the participants continually made choices about the curriculum, because this school does not use a specific curriculum for written expression instruction. The content of other academic subjects was outlined through a set curriculum in this school, which differentiated written expression instruction from the instruction of other subjects.

Teachers reported that many students struggled to be engaged during written expression activities and that some students displayed inappropriate behavior during lessons. Elizabeth described challenging behavior during her writing lesson stating,

> Their behavior was horrible. But that's a normal Tuesday, so it just comes and goes. My class is mostly behavior problems. I have like 5 on a behavior plan. So it's just really hard, when they have a bad day, just hard

> to teach and redirect them. So I think that was the only thing I would say that was really hard.

Participants hypothesized that these behaviors occurred when students did not connect to the material presented or did not understand how to do the activities. Many teachers reported that written expression was generally a difficult subject for children to understand, differentiating it from other subjects. Written expression was also reported to be a difficult subject to teach, because most participants did not have training specific to this subject. Carol did not enjoy teaching writing and stated,

> When they bring me their writing, there maybe twelve different things wrong with it and I have to fix all twelve and lots of times I don't even know where we should start, what's best for this student, where do we start?

Because of the difficulty managing the classroom environment, teachers chose activities that created an environment conducive to learning, whereas different activities could have been chosen if managing the classroom environment was not a central focus. For example, teachers sometimes chose to use peer learning activities to keep all students engaged while also allowing her to interact individually with students struggling with either academic content or focus. Managing the classroom environment was difficult for most participants, although the degree of difficulty varied. Teachers thought processes for instructing written expression were impacted by the difficult demands of managing the classroom; but, the next theme describes the support teachers found in colleagues to deal with difficult classroom experiences.

Teaching them to do it on their own. Although collaboration was an important aspect of instruction, participants also valued student independence throughout the writing process. The desire to increase student independence guided the teacher decision

making processes when planning lessons and when making instructional decisions during written expression lessons, because students needed the opportunity to demonstrate individual skills. Betty said, “We need to start weaning them from just all doing it together.”

Participants indicated that students needed to become independent writers, and they described the process for increasing students’ abilities to become more independent. Teachers’ thought processes were guided by the drive for student independence to increase each child’s ability to show knowledge and skills. For example, Carol taught students to use a checklist to monitor their own writing to determine if they had completed all necessary steps in the writing process. This allowed students to check their own work prior to asking her to check their work and prepared students for more challenging writing activities in subsequent grades. Carol said, “So, it’s another tool to move them into independence that they’re going to need when they get to first grade.”

By teaching students to become independent writers, the participants indicated that they could focus their attention on meeting the needs of students who were struggling and on creating increasing challenges for students who were successful writers. Gabby described a research project she completed as part of her master’s degree program to examine student writing and peer editing.

> Gabby: It was about teaching children how to ….write but then edit their writing, to check to see if it’s done correctly and they do it in pal pairs so that a pair of students will edit each other’s together so that they can improve their writing because what we were doing before I didn’t feel like was really effective in helping them see their own mistakes, and it also frees me from being the one that they bring it (a writing assignment) to to see, “Is it okay, teacher?” So, then it’s really fabulous, they really do use the editing tool now even in other writing that they do, and that’s been really great.

Other participants described the use of graphic organizers for students to learn to structure their own writing. Throughout the interviews, teachers used various terms to describe the organizers, such as a ‘camera’ or ‘planner’. The graphic organizers were used by students to structure the sentences that students would later write. They included different shaped boxes for students to write information that corresponds to the type of word associated with the box shape according to the Writing Alive curriculum. For example, verbs were written in triangles, subjects in rectangle, and prepositional phrases in clouds (See Image 2). By teaching the students to use a graphic organizer, students were then able to understand the writing process and build skills to independently use the writing process in the future. Diane stated that by teaching students to use the graphic organizer now for short writing activities, they would be able to apply the same principles to larger term papers in high school.

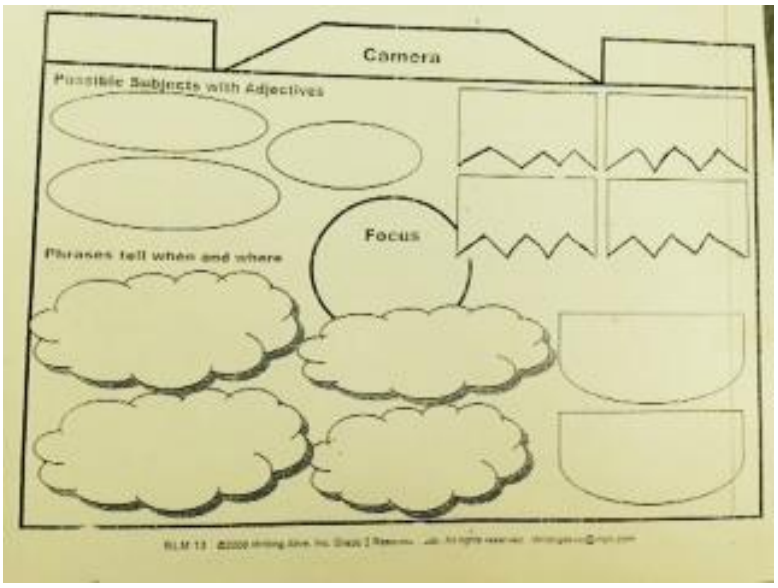

Image 2. Camera graphic organizer

Students were also encouraged to demonstrate their independence by generating their own ideas regarding a writing topic. For example, Ann, Betty, and Gabby’s classes wrote about ‘cool jobs’. Each teacher created her own graphic organizer to demonstrate

the planning phase of writing to students, which included her unique choice of a 'cool job'. Students were then encouraged to choose their own 'cool job' to write about. The first step for each student was to complete a graphic organizer, referred to as a 'planner'. Anne indicated that this was difficult for students.

> Anne: …and so it's taking ownership over the language and they're not there yet, they're not confident. I don't know if I've given them I guess I can't tell if I haven't given them enough or I don't know if they're not confident enough, to do it yet.

When Anne's students struggled to generate their own ideas for regarding 'cool jobs' she believed that this may have been due to the large jump from teacher guided writing to independently generated ideas. Anne was surprised that the students struggled to the degree they did. Anne began prompting students with specific verbal questions before requiring that they write the information. She also chose to return to the parts of speech her students needed to include in the planner regarding a 'cool job'. She used a different color to write each corresponding part of speech that her students are familiar with due to the use of the Writing Alive curriculum. Anne also shared that she explained to her students again that the current planner was informational in nature, rather than story-telling, because her students more often write stories. She stated that she was more interactive with her students when teaching the lesson the second time and asked more questions of her students. In addition, she modeled her own writing process by creating a new planner, rather than showing her students a completed planner. Through this process, Anne learned that her students were less independent than she had anticipated.

By building student independence in writing, the participants reported that they were able to focus on students who needed assistance or students who needed more challenging work to continue to improve their skills. Some students struggled to have the

confidence to attempt to write independently, which limited the student's ability to demonstrate a range of written expression skills. Although participants valued student development of independent skills, they also relied on students' behavior throughout the lessons to inform instructional decisions.

Taking cues from students. Teachers valued student behavior as a cue to guiding the thought process for instructional decisions throughout written expression lessons. As students developed basic skills with support, they were able to build more advanced skills with fewer supports. Although some students possessed the necessary skills to be proficient writers, they may lack the ability to self-motivate, reducing the demonstration of skills. One indicator that participants reported using when creating or changing lesson plans was cues from students. Student cues included various behaviors, such as crying, asking questions, demonstrating competency, and acting out. Based on these behaviors, participants reported making decisions regarding moving on to more challenging material, re-teaching lessons, or changing a lesson format (e.g., from whole class instruction to small group or individual instruction), among other things.

Regarding using student behavior to guide instructional decisions, Betty stated, "Well, one of them was in tears. Lots of, "I don't know! I don't know!" Lots of yelling out. Just body language. I lost the group." Betty then used this information to decide that she needed to re-teach part of the lesson in order for the majority of students to be able to understand the concept. Anne similarly shared:

> Well, other than my kids that were just sitting there crying… just a lot of questions, which is fine…but I mean….twenty-four kids that needed me to work one on one with them. And so it was very obvious… and they couldn't even do like the first step by themselves.

Observing these cues provided by students to indicate frustration and a lack of ability, Anne changed her thought process towards the instruction she was providing to students. She then re-taught information that the class had already been presented with.

Fiona discussed the need for understanding her class of students to be able to read the cues they provided. This allowed her to recognize what each student's behavior meant. To describe this she stated, "You absorb everything that's going on in here. It's in you." Fiona was describing the importance of understanding her students and their behavior. To her, this has become a natural process. Fiona was aware of her students' writing skills without looking back at recent work. She also has an understanding of which students should be challenged to write more or write with more complexity. This allows her to meet a variety of student needs within her lessons, altering the expectations for low, average and high achievers. Fiona is also able to continue to attend to the needs of her students and the cues provided by them without losing her focus on the content of the writing lesson. During the observation of Fiona, she was observed to alter her feedback to each student based on the needs of the student. During the post-observation interview, she described how she anticipated the products each student would create and the level of feedback they would need.

Summary of Themes

The four primary themes that emerged from the data gathered were described throughout this chapter. These themes include: (1)I am guided by a system,(2)Trial and error, (3)First, we plan (subthemes: (3a)We work together and (3b)Using the five senses), (4)I make adjustments as I go (subthemes: (4a)Managing it all, (4b)Teaching them to do it on their own, and (4c)Taking cues from students). Through the remainder of this

chapter I will summarize the information gathered regarding the foundational decision making systems developed by teachers, as well as the instructional decision making processes for selecting methods and strategies to instruct written expression.

Foundational decision making

The participants in this study indicated that the underlying guiding principles they followed for teaching written expression had generally been developed through practice, training, experience, rather than through formal instructional methods in teacher training programs. When I asked each teacher about her decision making process for instructing written expression, most were uncertain about an overarching system that would guide her thought processes initially, although when they each described through the course of the interview following the Common Core standards as an overarching guide.

All the teachers indicated that the Common Core standards guide her underlying thought process when formulating her ideas regarding written expression. In addition, the Writing Alive curriculum guided the foundational thought processes of many teachers, particularly those who had been at North Elementary School for many years. The teachers may have relied on these systems for conceptualizing written expression because they were not taught other theoretical perspectives formally throughout their education.

The foundational decision making systems for teachers were important to understand, because all the teachers were guided by something, even when they were unaware of the system. This was better understood when teachers described the lesson planning process and inadvertently indicated foundational decision making systems. Many teachers formulated a conceptualization of written expression including a formalized system (i.e., Common Core standards) with her personal learned experiences.

As teachers could better predict how students would respond and behave during instruction, she could incorporate this into her lesson planning. This personal experience is considered to be part of her foundational system of written expression, because it contributes to the formation of many lessons over time. As the number of years a teacher taught increased, her ability to predict her students' behavior and abilities also increased, although many teachers did not explicitly state this. Teachers described the incorporation of past experiences in to current instruction.

Throughout this study, the participants described many steps necessary in making instructional decisions during written expression lessons; however, many of these steps were ingrained practices and some were aspects of the classroom environment teachers must continually consider. Some of the teachers indicated a general dislike for instructing writing and a personal dislike for writing. Carol indicated that she believed this impacted her students' perspectives of writing. In addition, the lack of a unified curriculum followed by the school may have increased the challenge for teachers in selecting strategies and methods for written expression instruction. Teachers appeared to use similar decision making strategies as one another. Additionally, they indicated increased confidence in decision making over time.

Initially, most of the participants began selecting the methods and strategies to be used during lessons by collaborating with other same grade level teachers. The basic guidelines provided to teachers when planning written expression lessons were to teach all of the grade level appropriate standards from the Common Core. Because teachers had the ability to choose the order of lessons to be taught throughout the school year and were able to use any strategies or methods they chose, significant variability could be present

between classrooms. Teachers lacking confidence or experience generally relied on support from others to fill in the gaps that a generalized, school-wide curriculum might have supplied.

While instructing the lesson usually planned collaboratively with same grade level teachers, unexpected changes could occur in the classroom that teachers had to adapt to. The participants expected some of these experiences to occur, but were surprised by others. For example, the first grade teachers were surprised by the significant level of frustration experienced by their students during the cool jobs lesson. This indicates the reliance these teachers had on the lessons they previously taught to other classes of students. In addition, newer teachers or less confident teachers had the ability to rely on colleagues when planning lessons, but had to make decisions independently during the delivery of lessons. Throughout this study, teachers described how they plan and deliver written expression lessons to students. In this chapter, I explained the participants, the setting, development of codes and themes, and explained the themes. In the next chapter, I will explain the discussion, themes, and recommendations will be explained.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study I took a phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of seven kindergarten through second grade teachers while planning for and instructing written expression in general education settings. In addition to using a phenomenological approach in this study, I also used a constructivist framework which allowed me to examine the meaning participant's attached to personal experiences. Each participant completed two interviews and one observation during classroom instruction. The four primary themes derived from the data were described in chapter IV and throughout this chapter I will provide conclusions gathered from the data, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

The data gathered from this study serve to answer two primary research questions regarding the teaching practices and instructional decision making of early elementary school teachers while instructing written expression. Written expression is a different subject matter than other academic subjects taught in elementary school because it can be used as a creative outlet and method for demonstrating knowledge in other subjects. The purpose of this study was to gather qualitative data to better understand the lived experiences of teachers regarding written expression instruction, including instructional decision making and chosen methods for instruction.

The primary themes found from the data in this study include (1) I am guided by a system, (2) Trial and error, (3) First, we plan, and (4) I make adjustments as I go. Themes 1 and 2 answer research question 1, while the last two themes answer research question 2. In addition, First, we plan includes two subthemes [(3a) We work together and (3b) Using the five senses]. Theme 4 includes three subthemes, which are (4a) Managing it all, (4b) Teaching them to do it on their own, and (4c) Taking cues from students. The information gathered from the data in this study can be used to inform practices used in teacher training programs, suggests the need for continuing education regarding written expression throughout a teacher's career, and describes the common practice of teachers supporting one another during instruction.

Discussion

Important implications for teachers, administrators and instructors in teacher training programs have arisen through the completion of this study. The data gathered provide valuable information for stakeholders in written expression instruction education regarding the instructional practices that take place during these lessons. In several ways, the experiences of teachers in this study were similar to the information found in the literature review, and the data gathered serve to further inform the field of written expression instructional practices.

Written Expression Instruction

Each participant in this study provided a definition or description of written expression during the pre-observation interview. These definitions varied from one another, but commonly included a requirement for students to be able to express themselves through written word. In addition, most of the definitions included

descriptions of the tasks that students at different grade levels were expected to acquire. These definitions were similar in general to that provided by Robinson and Howell (2008) who stated that written expression "requires the writer to assign words to thoughts" (p. 439). The teachers in this study used broad definitions of written expression that were specific to the grade the teacher instructs. The definition of written expression used in this study was: communication that is goal directed in nature through which an individual assigns words to independent thoughts in order to express one's self.

Written expression was described by Dudley-Marling and Paugh (2009) as a naturally social activity in which students can learn authentically from peers and teachers. Participants commonly described taking a social cognitive perspective in written expression instruction by using peer mediated learning activities during instruction. This was consistent with research that suggests that students gained skills in written expression through using social interactions and activities in lessons (Box, 2002; Dyson, 1991; & Dyson, 2010). Many social activities were described and observed during the interviews and observations in this study, including Author's Chair, peer editing, and partner writing activities. Dyson (1991) indicated that students who had poorly developed written expression skills would be able to gain written expression skills from peers naturally through observation of successful peers. In addition, Mackenzie (2011) stated that allowing students to incorporate drawings in to written expression activities could reduce student frustration and increased the attention to natural skills students may have. Several participants specifically described the inclusion of drawing as another tool used by students to further communicate with others. Nearly all participants in this study supported this approach and valued the natural development of students' writing skills

through a variety of expressive activities in the classroom. Taking a social cognitive approach to written expression is well supported in the literature to increase student's writing skills, which was similar to the data gathered through this study.

Throughout this study, participants described making instructional decisions regarding written expression based on a variety of different factors. Personal experience, experience of others, influence of the Common Core state standards, and the classroom environment all contributed to teacher's decision making processes regarding written expression. One area discussed by most participants as informing decision making were informal assessment procedures. Participants reported that they took cues from student work, student behavior, informally monitored student progress during instruction, and listened to student communication with classmates during lessons. Penner-Williams, Smith, and Gartin (2009) stated that, "Because of its complexity, the assessment of written language is difficult and, at times, highly subjective", which may explain some of the difficulty teachers described in making instructional decisions regarding writing. These authors further state, "…its informal nature often results in teachers not effectively using the information obtained". This may account in part for the challenges faced by the participants in having confidence when making instructional decisions using available, informal data collection methods and when making decisions spontaneously during lessons, specifically when students experienced unexpected challenges.

Coker and Ritchey (2010) described the challenges that teachers may have experienced when scoring informal data collection measures, because a variety of scoring procedures could be used when evaluating sentences, and scoring procedures are often more complicated than either correct or incorrect responses. When students were asked to

complete a writing prompt, several different aspects of the measure can be evaluated and scored, such as the number of words written, correct spelling, complexity of the passage and punctuation, among other things. Students can respond to writing prompts in very different ways that can both be correct. For example, Anne, Betty and Gabby all asked their students to write about a cool job, and students could choose very different vocabulary, while still providing correct answers (ex: cop or police officer). The teacher must then consider which aspects of the response to grade, which aspects to use to inform future instructional decisions, what deficits need to be addressed with the whole class, and which students need additional support individually. Written expression tasks require visual-spatial skills and fine and gross motor development, in addition to conceptual and skill based knowledge (Penner-Williams, Smith, & Gartin, 2009). When informal assessments, in addition to a variety of other classroom factors, are informing instructional decision making in writing, teacher confidence can be reduced and instruction may not be empirically supported.

In addition to varying levels of pre-service preparation, the participants in this study indicated that they had varying levels of training on instructing written expression once they became teachers. Teachers may have attended different trainings from one another at different times, or began their teaching careers with different degrees of knowledge. Each teacher was then expected to be able to instruct her class on the same grade level skills, even though teacher skill levels are inconsistent. This could lead to reliance on collaboration from colleagues to share the necessary information, rather than reliance on training. The knowledge about the training is then not received from the original source, creating an increased possibility that communication errors could take

place and information could be misinterpreted or poorly instructed. Administrators should consider the support provided to teachers during trainings and may choose to increase the number of teachers attending such trainings or the variety of trainings attended by school personnel.

One of the important findings is that many teachers do not feel prepared to instruct written expression upon completion of teacher training program, indicating that they may require additional support from administrators and colleagues when they begin classroom instruction. Gilbert and Graham (2011) also reported a similar finding, stating that many teachers self-report that they are lacking training in written expression instruction. This should suggest to administrators that they may need to invest in in-service training programs for teachers and should also indicate to faculty in teacher training programs that increased emphasis should be placed on written expression instruction during training to improve teaching practice and to improve the marketability of future teachers. These findings are important for all stakeholders in improving student written expression skills, including those instructing students at higher grade levels because students may not be learning the necessary foundational skills for written expression in the early grades to be successful without additional supports later in their educational careers. The information then raises the question of how new teachers, with little to no experience, will develop a successful teaching practice when they are unable to rely on their own experience and do not come in to the field with formal training.

The teachers in this study would have benefited from additional training regarding differentiating writing instruction to challenge weaker students and stronger students adequately. Additionally, these teachers indicated that they struggled initially to balance

the range of skills that contribute to writing proficiency, such as fine motor skills, vocabulary skills, understanding of audience and genres, and grammar, among other things. Although the participants were able to develop these skills, collaboration with colleagues was most beneficial and took time. All of these skills would be beneficial to be included in teacher training programs.

In this study, nearly all participants sought frequent collaboration with same and similar grade level colleagues. Hindin, Morocco, Mott, and Aguilar (2007) have discussed the roles that different teachers take when planning collaboratively. These authors indicated that more "expert" teachers often did not share as much of their relevant knowledge as they could have when collaborating and that personality characteristics contributed to the amount of information shared by participants. Many barriers can exist to teachers collaborating with one another. Lawson (2004) indicates that while individuals could choose to work collaboratively, they still work within the confines of an organization, such as a school, and must follow the structure initiated by that entity. For example, some schools may not share the culture of this school in which collaboration with colleagues was highly valued. Teachers working collaboratively have had the opportunity to reflect on their own teaching practices and improve their own practices (Gitlin, 1999). The teachers in this study demonstrated how collaborative instructional planning can be done effectively.

The participants in this study heavily relied on the Common Core standards to assist them in planning lessons, as a guide when collaborating with colleagues, and as a system for understanding written expression. The Common Core standards provides a "roadmap for writing instruction" (Graham & Harris, 2013). The Colorado Department of

Education adopted the Common Core standards in August of 2010, with supplemental requirements unique to the state (Colorado Department of Education, n.d.). Graham and Harris (2013) reported that written expression instruction has changed significantly since the Common Core was instituted, which was also accompanied by significant efforts to alter the instruction of written expression.

The implementation of the Common Core standards has garnered many different opinions, and VanTassel-Baska (2015) identified several arguments for and against its use. She states that it has led to expectation of higher level tasks and expectations for students. VanTassel-Baska reported that an argument against the use of the Common Core is that teachers lack the training to implement it effectively. The participants in this study indicated that they had not been well trained in instructing written expression, including using the elements of the Common Core. Many of the teachers began teaching several years before the Common Core was adopted, and they indicated they would require continuing education on this topic to be up to date on the expectations outlined by the standards. Fiona, for example, noted after using the Common Core that she had inadvertently missed some elements and had miss understood some of the standards.

The participants in this study provided important data that served to inform other current teachers, pre-service teachers, school administrators, and teacher educators. These participants described challenges in teaching writing and the actions they have taken to improve their success in the classroom. In many ways, the data reported by these participants were similar to that found in previous literature, including similar definitions of written expression and the value placed on using social interactions during lessons. In addition, they indicated that they are aware of the limitations that they have regarding

written expression instruction. The participants used collaboration with colleagues and a reliance on the Common Core standards to overcome the described lack and inconsistency in training.

Overall, the participants expressed varying levels of training, comfort, and knowledge regarding teaching written expression. Each shared a unique experience of the phenomenon of instructing written expression; however, significant common elements were also shared. Throughout the themes and codes that were developed in my research, the participants consistently described a reliance on basic teaching principals, compared to reliance on skills or strategies specific to written expression instruction. The elements specific to written expression were more commonly found in the development of a foundational decision making system, rather than in the day to day decision making process regarding written expression. This may be related to the common description of a lack of confidence regarding instructing written expression. Participants with more teaching experience tended to report higher levels of confidence with writing, although they continued to rely on general teaching principals to structure lessons rather than strategies specific to writing. The lack of confidence reported by teachers appeared in multiple themes as a common thread of experiences reported by teachers in different areas of the lesson planning and instructional decision making process. In addition, the teachers' overall perspectives of writing appeared to be impacted by this lack of confidence.

Limitations

Throughout this study, rich information was gathered regarding the lived experiences of teachers instructing written expression lessons to early elementary school

students. Limitations are present in the study regarding generalizability, data collection methods, and participant requirements.

Including nearly all the kindergarten through second grade teachers in one school can be viewed as a strength, because the influence of school culture can be better accounted for; this also limits the generalizability of the data, because they have not come from multiple sites. One of the other weaknesses of this study is that the data were all collected at the same period in the school year. Although this allowed the teachers to reflect on similar experiences at the same period within the same school year, it also may have led many of the participants to reflect only on the recent experiences, rather than a wider variety of experiences throughout the school year. An additional limitation to the generalizability of this study is the demographic nature of the community in which the data were collected and that data were only collected from one school. Collecting data from multiple schools would have allowed for greater generalizability. North Elementary school is located in a small, rural school district with a higher Hispanic and low-income population than the state average. The data can only be generalized to similar settings. Because of these limitations and the nature of qualitative research, the findings of this study must be considered in the context of the participants, rather than as data that are generalizable to a wide population.

An additional limitation to this study is the nature of the face-to-face interview style. Some participants may have shared limited information regarding their own experiences in this format, and may have been more open to sharing information through a survey methodology. By including a classroom observation, the likelihood that the descriptions participants gave of their experiences instructing written expression are

accurate; however, only one observation was conducted in each classroom. An additional related limitation is that the data provided by these participants are solely each participant's opinion. I was unable to verify the level of participant's training, but could only use the information provided by each participant.

In this study, none of the participants created written lesson plans for any academic lessons. The teachers showed their lesson planning books, which primarily included only one word or a short phrase regarding the lesson to be taught. This was a limitation to the study because the lesson plans could not be evaluated for consistency between the initial plan and the lesson that was carried out. In future studies, a requirement for participation could include pre-written lesson plans.

Suggestions for Future Research

Some of the suggestions for future research serve to improve the data that were gathered during this study. Other suggestions would build on the data to answer additional and similar research questions. Additional research in the area of written expression instruction could be gathered qualitatively or quantitatively, as each methodology contributes differently to the field.

One of the limitations to the current study is that all the data were gathered from one small, rural school, which limits the generalizability of the data. This would improve the trustworthiness of the data and increase the likelihood that the data are valid. In addition, some of the demographic characteristics of the school examined in this study likely contributed to the teacher practices of the participants. A school with demographic characteristics more similar to that of the state of Colorado may yield different results.

The generalizability of the data gathered in this study is limited due to the qualitative nature of the study, but also by the unique characteristics of the population sampled.

Another area for future research would include exploring the experiences of additional school based professionals. First, teachers in upper elementary school grades could be interviewed to gain perspectives on increasingly advanced written expression tasks. Through the current research study, I was able to understand the continuity that could be created when continuous grade level teachers communicate and collaborate with one another. By adding a wider range of grade level teachers to the research, I would be able to better understand the continuity that can be created in a school to ensure consistency for students throughout their elementary school years. Similarly, it could be beneficial to include all teachers in a single school at all grade levels using the same model used in this study. This would allow for consistency in the methods and curriculum used at the school, while also allowing the researcher to explore the continuity throughout one entire school building. Examining the perspectives and involvement of the administration of the same school would also add to the richness of the data collected and add a systemic perspective to the data.

Additional data collection methods would yield different responses from participants. For example, participants may be more open to providing information about their own weaknesses in instructing written expression by using a survey method. This could be completed with teachers across a variety of schools and demographics could be gathered to explore differences in school populations. A focus group format could be implemented to allow teachers to build on the answers provided by one another. This may increase the depth of responses, but could also increase social pressure to provide

“correct” responses. Additional observations could be conducted during grade level planning and collaborative periods to better understand the process employed by the teachers at this time.

Different research questions could also be examined to further examine teachers’ perspectives of written expression instruction. One area that future research questions could examine would be the collaborative process for teachers because this was described by the current participants as an important aspect of lesson planning. Research questions could seek to understand the collaborative process at each grade level or throughout the school. Additionally, research questions examining the differences between collaborative planning for written expression compared to other academic subjects would be is important for better differentiating writing. The general limitations and supports for collaborative work would provide valuable information regarding the practical ability to collaborate within a school. In addition, the support or encouragement from administration to engage in collaborative planning would be an important area to explore because this has a strong impact on each teacher’s ability to collaborate with colleagues.

Although a significant amount of data were gained through the course of this investigation, the data do not indicate the degree to which teachers rely each of the aspects of decision making described. Additionally, it is not known how effective each of the decision making tools is in accurately informing teachers or which decision making indicators teachers are best able to use. A multitude of variables, such as classroom characteristics, requirements of school districts, experience of teachers, and personal characteristics of teachers could be controlled for in studies to address the complex nature

of elementary school classrooms, and more specifically, written expression instruction in such classrooms.

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APPENDIX A

NATIONAL COUNCIL ON THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH AND THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION STANDARDS OF THE TEACHING OF WRITTEN EXPRESSION

1. “Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works” (p.19)

2. “Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.” (p.21)

3. “Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).” (p. 22)

4. “Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.” (p. 24)

5. “Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.” (p.25)

6. “Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.” (p. 26)

7. “Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.” (p. 27).

8. “Students use a variety of technological and informational resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.” (p. 28)

9. “Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.” (p. 29)

10. “Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.” (p. 30)

11. “Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.” (p. 31)

12. “Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).” (p. 32)

APPENDIX B

PRE-OBSERVATION INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Time of Interview: Date: Place:

Interviewer: Lisa C.H. Little Interviewee: Position of Interviewee:

Background information:

Teacher's name: Grade:

School name:

Questions:

General teaching method/thought process/decision making questions

1. What are the important components of a written expression lesson?
2. Where do you get ideas for what should be included in writing lessons?
3. Describe the assistance that you typically provide to your students when they are completing writing activities.
4. Describe a lesson/activity that you believe was particularly successful. What happened in it? What makes you believe it was successful?
5. Similarly, what was a writing lesson that you do not believe was successful? What happened to make you believe it was unsuccessful?
6. What accommodations or modifications do you make to lessons for struggling students?
7. How much personal choice/freedom do you have to determine what will be included in lessons?
8. Describe the level of student writing skills in your classroom.
9. How do you know when students are successfully developing writing skills? How do you know when they have mastered the concept you are teaching?
10. In your own words, please define written expression, and what does that look like for the grade you teach?
11. What experience has most impacted your practices in teaching writing?
12. What framework do you use for student skill development (big ideas, 6 traits, etc.)?
13. How does state standardized testing inform your decisions about what will be included in lessons?

Lesson specific questions

1. Walk me through the lesson and describe each activity in the lesson (time allotted; individual/small group/whole class; permanent products; teacher materials; etc).
2. What is the desired outcome of the lesson/desired skill for students to learn?
3. How will you measure student success and how will you know when students understand the concepts?

4. How did you determine what activities will be used in this lesson?
5. What struggles do you see potentially for students and how will these be managed?

APPENDIX C

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Time of Interview: Date: Place:

Interviewer: Lisa C.H. Little Participant:

# of Students/Teachers:

Teacher's name: Grade:

School name:

Questions:

1. How is instruction delivered (whole class, small group, individual)?
2. What types and with what frequency to students have opportunities to respond?
    a. What types of responses are expected?
3. What is the classroom arrangement?
4. How long does the lesson last?
    a. Was it mostly engaged time (on a scale from 1(not at all) to 5(completely engaged))?
5. What is the goal of the lesson/does the lesson have a specific goal?
    a. What is the target skill?
6. What opportunities do students have to work peer to peer?
7. How do students indicate that they need help?
8. Are all aspects of the planned lesson covered in the presented lesson? If not, what aspects are missing?
9. What aspects of the lesson are included, but are different from the planned lesson?
10. Does the lesson match with what empirical evidence says teachers should be doing?

APPENDIX D

POST-OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Time of Interview: Date: Place:

Interviewer: Lisa C.H. Little Interviewee: Position of Interviewee:

Background information:

Teacher's name: Grade:

School name:

Questions:

1. What is your general impression of the lesson?
2. What part of the lesson was most successful?
3. What was your biggest challenge in the lesson?
4. How did you know which students understood the concept you were teaching and which students did not?
5. How does this lesson relate to previous lessons and how will it relate to future lessons (does the next lesson build on a previous lesson/are they related to one another)?
6. How did administration of this lesson compare to administration of past lessons?
7. Do you think you achieved the goal(s) of the lesson/did students learn the target skill(s)? How do you know/what happened to indicate that students either gained/didn't gain new skills?
8. What accommodations/modifications did you make to assist students who were struggling during this lesson?
9. Next year, will you give the same lesson? Why or why not?
10. If you were going to go back and give this lesson again, how would you do it differently?

Video:

- Watch parts of video-taped lesson and have photocopy of the lesson available.
- Ask predetermined questions regarding differences between the lesson planning process and the actual lesson presentation (questions vary based on participant).
    - For example, what happened in this section of the lesson where you changed this section of the lesson compared to what you had planned in the written lesson plans?
- Examine student work related to the lesson with the teacher.
    - What aspects of this work indicate to you that the student understands the concept?

APPENDIX E

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Time of Interview: Date: Place:

Interviewer: Lisa C.H. Little Interviewee: Position of Interviewee:

Background information:

Teacher's name: Grade:

School name:

Questions:

1. Total number of years teaching:
2. Number of years teaching in this school:
3. Grade levels that you have taught:
4. Training in written expression instruction:
5. Curriculum used by the school:

APPENDIX F

INFORMED CONSENT

UNIVERSITY of
NORTHERN COLORADO

CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: Instructional Practices in Early Elementary School Written Expression: Teacher beliefs, Instructional Strategies and Decision Making
Researcher: Lisa C.H. Little, B.A., Psychology & Family Services
Phone: 515-988-3800 E-mail: hick3006@bears.unco.edu
Research Advisor: Dr. Koehler-Hak, Ph.D.
Phone: 970-351-1603 E-mail: kathrine.hak@unco.edu

Purpose and Description: The primary purpose of this study is to explore the instructional decision making process of early elementary school teachers instructing written expression.

Participants will be asked to complete two face to face interviews and one classroom observation. Each interview will last approximately 30-60 minutes and the observation will be the length of one complete written expression classroom lesson. The interviews will be audio recorded and the observation will be video recorded. Participants will have the choice to answer any questions they feel comfortable doing so and may end the interview at any point.

At the end of the interviews, we would be happy to share your data with you at your request. The audio recordings will be stored on a locked computer by the lead investigator until the transcriptions have all been completed. We will take every precaution in order to protect your anonymity. We will assign a pseudonym to you. Only the lead investigator will know the name connected with a pseudonym and when we report data, your name will not be used. Data collected and analyzed for this study will only be accessible by the researcher and research assistants.

In this research study there are no foreseeable risks. Participants will be offered a $20 gift card to Scholastic to purchase classroom books. Additionally, the lead researcher will offer to provide an in-service training to all teachers in the school regarding written expression instruction in early elementary school.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise

entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

_____ _____

Participant's Signature Date

_____

Researcher's Signature Date

APPENDIX G

IRB

Title: Instructional Practices in Early Elementary School Written Expression: Teacher beliefs, Instructional Strategies and Decision Making

A. Purpose

1. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the current practices taking place in kindergarten through second grade classrooms during written expression instruction. One of the primary reasons to learn about this activity is that the majority of students nationally are failing to demonstrate proficient written expression skills at multiple grade levels. There are several factors that may contribute to the lack of student skills, but I will be investigating the instructional decisions made by teachers during such lessons to understand how teachers' decisions impact student skill development.

   Written expression is an important subject for students to master for several reasons. Students are commonly required to use writing to demonstrate knowledge in multiple other subjects throughout their educational careers. Additionally, students must use writing to communicate with other people in casual, academic and professional settings later in life. For these reasons, students must develop written expression skills to be successful throughout education and later in life.

   There are several theoretical perspectives explaining the content to be included in written expression lessons. The most commonly used perspective is the Common Core State Standards, which have been adopted by nearly all states in the United States. These guidelines provide information to teachers on the information to be included in lessons, but they do not provide information for teachers on the instructional methods to be used. In addition, many teachers are not taught during teacher training programs the appropriate methods for instructing written expression. When teachers do not have adequate training to instruct a subject, they rely on personal beliefs, biases, and past educational experiences to guide their practice. This reliance on personal opinions leads to inconsistencies in the teaching of written expression. A compounding problem is that many elementary school teachers have a preference against instructing written expression. Both pre-service teachers and current teachers report written expression to be one of their least favorable subjects to instruct. The combination of a lack of training, reliance on personal beliefs, biases, and past educational experiences, and a preference against instructing written expression all combine to create a poor learning environment for students. In order to ensure that students are provided with similar opportunities to learn new written expression information, the methods used to teach written expression should be explored.

   The purpose of the current study is to explore the interrelationships among teacher beliefs, knowledge, and instructional practices in elementary school classrooms during written expression instruction. Data has been gathered on effective teaching strategies to be used during written expression instruction, but it is difficult to determine if these practices are actually used in classrooms. While

many different factors could potentially impact students' abilities to demonstrate well developed written expression skills (i.e., curricula, peer influence, assessment methods), the current study will focus on the instructional methods and strategies used by teachers, the thought process influencing teachers' instructional decisions, and exploring the foundational knowledge guiding teachers' instructional decision making processes. Additionally, many teachers are struggling to determine the most effective ways to include written expression across the curriculum On a large scale, the purpose of this study is to begin to assist teachers in making the task of teaching written expression less burdensome by better understanding common classroom practices, the challenges teachers report experiencing during written expression instruction, and the successful aspects of written expression instruction.

2. I have chosen to submit this document as an expedited study because I will be in elementary school classrooms, videotaping teachers' behaviors while they are presenting lessons. Students will be present in the room; however, efforts will be put forth to ensure that the teachers' behavior is the primary focus of the video tapes. Additionally, there is no foreseeable for the participants, as they will be completing observations and interviews.

B. Methods – Be specific when addressing the following items.

1. Participants
   The sample size will be approximately 6 participants and they will be recruited from small school districts throughout the Front Range and Eastern Plains of Colorado. The criteria for participation include teaching in a general education classroom in grades kindergarten through second grade, teaching for at least two years, using the current curriculum or method for at least one year, and having a dedicated writing class period. The final sample size will be determined based on reaching saturation and will range from four to ten participants. Participants will be contacted through email or phone calls.

2. Data Collection Procedures
   Data will be gathered through one pre-observation interview, one observation, one post-observation interview, and through examination of artifacts.
   Pre-observation interview. Data collection will include three primary steps that when combined, will all examine one specific lesson administered by each participant. The first task to be completed is a semi-structured in person individual interview prior to the lesson administration and observation. This interview will last approximately 30-60 minutes. This time I will ask the teacher about the lesson planning process for the lesson that I will later videotape, the theoretical basis for the teachers' decision making process, personal beliefs about written expression (i.e., development of written expression, knowledge of

literature, methods of teaching) and the initial plans for the class-wide written expression lesson. This interview will be audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. The purpose of this task is to gain an understanding of the teachers' decision making process in determining the content, activities, teaching methods, and homework that students will complete during the writing lesson.

Observation. The second task to be completed is to videotape the administration of the written expression lesson that was discussed in the initial interview. This will be completed by a graduate student research assistant or me. The purpose of video recording the lesson is to later watch selected sections of the videotape with the teacher to compare the actual lesson given to the lesson initially planned by the teacher. During the observation the video camera will be pointed towards the teacher to primarily capture the teachers' behaviors and instructional practices. Additionally, the observation will allow me to evaluate classroom organization and opportunities for participation.

Post-observation interview. The final task to be completed is an in person semi-structured individual interview with each teacher after the lesson has been administered. This interview will last approximately 30-60 minutes. I will view sections of the videotaped lesson with the teacher and ask him or her about any discrepancies between the initial lesson plan and the events that actually took place during the lesson. This will help me to better understand why the teacher made instructional decisions during the lesson and the factors that impact the lesson while it is happening.

Artifacts. The artifacts to be examined are lesson plans that have been created and will be used by teachers and any homework assignments or worksheets to be used by teachers.

No deception will be used in this study.

3. Data Analysis Procedures

The data will be analyzed by first having all interviews transcribed. The transcriptions will then be organized in to Microsoft Word files. Each participant will have a unique Microsoft Word file containing all of the transcriptions related to that participant. In order to analyze the data, primarily bottom up analysis will be used because codes and themes will be created based on the data, rather than sorting the data in to preexisting codes and themes. I will be using single words or short phrases while coding all aspects of my data (i.e., transcripts, observations, and artifacts), although other types of codes can be used based on the researcher's preference. The codes will be organized by inserting electronic comments in to each of the transcripts. The codes will then be transferred to Microsoft Excel files. Each participant will have a unique Microsoft Excel file with different sheets for each piece of data that is analyzed. Codes will be recorded in to the sheets with the line number that the data is from also included in the Microsoft Excel sheets. Approximately 25-30 codes will be used, which will then be combined for form five to seven themes. To form themes, multiple similar codes will be combined together to represent larger concepts derived from the data. Themes will be

recorded in to Microsoft Excel, similar to the documentation of codes. By examining the commonly occurring codes and themes, I will be able to determine the most important information provided by participants. I will also use a research assistant to come to a consensus on the themes that have been derived.

4. Data Handling Procedures
   Each participant and school will be assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. All references to participants will be made through pseudonym, including transcripts provided to the research assistant. All data, including transcriptions, videos, and anecdotal notes, will be stored on my personal password protected computer. No one will have access to the videos, transcriptions, and anecdotal notes except for the research assistant, my research advisor, and me. The consent forms will be retained by my research advisor for three years and the original data will be retained by me for three years.

C. Risks, Discomforts and Benefits

There are no foreseeable risks for participants in this study. The activities participants will be engaging in are similar to those conducting on a daily basis in educational settings. Interviews will be conducted individually, and participants will not be required to respond to questions in any sort of public forum. Participants do not stand to benefit directly from participation in this study; however, the results from the study will contribute to the education field by increasing the understanding of effective instructional practices.

D. Costs and Compensations

The primary cost to participants will be the amount of time required to participate in the two interviews. The artifacts to be analyzed may be copies, rather than original documents and the original documents will not be lost to the participants. A classroom incentive will be offered to participants in the form of $20 gift certificates to Scholastic for classroom books. In addition, a school-wide incentive I will be offered in the form of an in-service training on beginning written expression for all teachers in the school.

APPENDIX H

MANUSCRIPT

Abstract

Many university teacher training programs do not provide future teachers with training regarding written expression instruction (Gilbert & Graham, 2010), leading to teachers lacking foundational teaching strategies for instructing written expression. This article focuses on the practical teaching experiences of seven early elementary school teachers instructing written expression. These experiences are examined through a phenomenological approach with a constructivist framework. Each participant completed two audio recorded semi-structured interviews and one classroom observation. Four major themes emerged from the transcripts, observations and artifacts gathered. Two of the themes include subthemes. The teachers reported primarily learning to instruct written expression through personal experience and the experience of colleagues, rather than from teacher training programs. Through this research, teachers described reliance on training while already working as elementary school educators and reliance on same grade-level colleagues to improve their own skills at instructing written expression. Additionally, some participants reported not realizing the limited knowledge that they had regarding written expression until they were already teachers. Furthermore, the participants indicated reliance on cues from their own students to determine the knowledge students have more heavily than using objective, research based tools. Written expression skills are important for early elementary school students in order for them to be able to express themselves, communicate with others, and to demonstrate their knowledge in a variety of academic subjects. In addition, early writing skills are valuable to allow students to build more complex skills in the future.

Introduction

Written expression instruction is a common activity in early elementary school classrooms, but only limited research exists to characterize the instructional decision making process of teachers while teaching this subject. Many teachers report limited training during teacher training programs to instruct written expression, which means that teachers must rely on other training opportunities to be able to instruct this subject successfully (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). The lack of training provided to teachers also increases the need to understand how teachers are making decisions during instruction.

The purpose of this study is twofold: first, to examine the experiences of teachers while instructing written expression, and second, to understand the instructional decision making process that takes place for teachers while instruction and planning written expression lessons. Current research is lacking in the field of early elementary school written expression instruction, specifically related to the experiences of teachers instructing this subject. The findings of this study are based on the experiences of seven kindergarten through second grade teachers. The findings yielded four major themes, which in essence suggest that teachers are not relying on formal university level training or empirical support for their teaching methods.

Literature Review

For the purposes of the current study, written expression is defined as communication that is goal directed in nature through which an individual assigns words to independent thoughts in order to express one's self. This definition is useful, because it allows the behavior to be goal directed in a variety of different ways, accounting for diverse learning needs. It was developed based on a definition provided by Robinson and

Howell (2008) who stated that written expression "requires the writer to assign words to thought" (p.439). By using a broad definition, a variety of tasks can therefore be considered written expression. Several different theoretical perspectives have been developed to explain the breadth of information to be taught during written expression instruction.

The instructional practices chosen by teachers to teach children how to write impacts students' development of these skills and the current study focused on the instructional methods selected by teachers. When using some curricula, the *information* to be taught during written expression lessons is predetermined for teachers, but the *methods* used to teach this information can be chosen by teachers. The individualized guidance and support provided by teachers is likely influential to the development of students' written expression skills, however, there is no simple way to measure or monitor these interactions (Diamond, Gerde, & Powell, 2008). Many other factors in the environment have the potential to impact student success in written expression. Some of these other factors include attitude and motivation, environmental factors, and the presence of learning disabilities (Anderson, Mallow, Nee, & Wear, 2003). Additionally, Dixon, Isaacson, Stein, and Bartos (2011) suggested that well developed written expression skills depend on the availability of social interactions, adequate cognitive functioning of the student, and the student's emotional connection to the material. Using a social cognitive perspective to enhance teaching strategies for early childhood education has been shown to increase children's abilities to fully develop written expression skills (Box, 2002; Dyson, 1991; Dyson, 2010). Classroom writing supports (e.g., paper, availability of writing tools, and a visual alphabet) are helpful to students,

but teacher interaction is likely more closely related to student success (Diamond, et al., 2008).

Recognizing the factors that can influence a student's success in written expression is important, because in order for students to be able to participate meaningfully in society as adults, they must develop proficient reading and writing skills (Risher, 2006). Written expression allows people to communicate with others throughout the world, to persuade others to agree with an opinion, and to express one's self (Graham, MacArthur & Fitzgerald, 2007). Students are expected to demonstrate knowledge of other academic subjects through written expression and poor written expression skills can contribute to a lack of success across academic areas (Robinson & Howell, 2008). Additionally, the literacy skills possessed by students when entering kindergarten strongly predict future educational achievement, highlighting the need to mediate low student skills immediately in a child's educational career (Diamond, et al., 2008). For these reasons, written expression instruction is clearly important and understanding the challenges faced by teachers instructing this subject is important to student success.

Children entering elementary school with increased knowledge of and experience with written expression are better able to devote cognitive resources to the abstract aspects of written expression, such as planning and composition (Puranik & Lonigan, 2011). Mackenzie (2011) reported that providing a child with a formal schooling environment that mirrors the child's previous learning environments in the home and in preschool allows the child to be more motivated to complete literacy tasks because the learning environment is familiar. The experiences children have with written expression prior to entering school are important for future skill development. Teachers can create a

classroom environment that is supportive of the natural developmental stage children are in, which can assist children in successfully develop written expression skills more quickly (Diamond, Gerde, & Powell, 2008).

Students develop written expression skills more easily through teacher-facilitated activities that are personally relevant to them (Mackenzie, 2011). Gilbert and Graham (2010) found that upper elementary school teachers reported about half of their students to be proficient writers, about 18% to be above average writers and about 33% to be below average writers. This indicates that teachers are aware that many students are lacking necessary written expression skills; however, the estimates made by teachers are very different from the nationally available data. From 1998 to 2002, fourth grade students and eighth grade students demonstrated slightly improved written expression scores, but twelfth grade students performed at a slightly lower level across the two testing years (United States Department of Education, 2003). Twenty-three percent of fourth grade students were at or above the Proficient level in 1998, while 28% of fourth grade students were in the same category in 2002 (United States Department of Education, 2003) . Twenty-seven percent of eighth graders were at or above the Proficient level in 1998 and this increased to 31% in 2002 (United States Department of Education, 2003). In 1998, 22% of twelfth grade students were at or above Proficient and this number rose to 24% in 2002 (United States Department of Education, 2003). In 2011, similar data were available for only eighth and twelfth grade students, and changed only slightly with eighth grade student performance decreasing and twelfth grade student performance increasing (United States Department of Education, 2011). The United States Department of Education (2011) states that only 24% of eighth and twelfth grade

students were proficient writers in based on data from the 2009-2010 academic year. Despite data demonstrating that most students are consistently lacking necessary written expression skills over many years, meaningful change has not been made in classrooms as the data show similar rates of student skills over time.

Several different models of written expression instruction are available. The Common Core State Standards are widely used to provide a framework for teachers to determine the information to be taught during written expression lessons (http://www.corestandards.org/, 2015). Although these frameworks provide teachers with information regarding *what* should be taught during written expression lessons, they do not provide teachers with an understanding of *how* this information should be taught.

Method

Phenomenology

This study is qualitative in nature and as the researcher, I am the primary method of data collection and data analysis (Merriam, 2009). Because of the limited research available related to this topic, an in depth understanding of the experiences of the participants is sought in order to continue to explore this topic and to develop future research questions for further inquiry (Creswell, 2013). “Phenomenological inquiry brings to language perceptions of human experiences with all types of phenomena” (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007, p. 75). In a phenomenological study, gathering the similar as well as dissimilar lived experiences is vital in order to gain insight in to the unique and shared aspects of each person’s experience (Conklin, 2007). A phenomenological design was used because the purpose of this study is to better understand the experience of teachers and to later strive to improve the classroom practices for beginning written

expression. I chose to use a phenomenological approach to this study because it wanted to explore the essence of each participant's lived experience.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is constructivist. Through a constructivist paradigm, Crotty (1998) states that "meaning is not discovered, but constructed" (p.42). In other words, those constructing the meaning of an experience are putting the pieces of the lived experiences together to develop meaning. Meaning is constructed subjectively by each participant, and I must rely on each participant to explain his or her individually constructed views (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, to follow the phenomenological perspective, these experiences were be combined to understand the general essence of all participants' experiences (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007).

Because each individual creates meaning independently, subjective explanations of experiences must be expected (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). In this sense, subjectivity means that knowledge is constructed through personal, lived experiences, rather than only through formal research means. Similar to the concept of participants constructing meaning individually, I also constructed meaning of my experiences conducting the present study. The aim of constructivism is not to criticize any individual's interpretation of personal lived experiences, but rather to strive to understand them (Crotty, 1998). In order for me to create meaning of the participants' experiences through the current study, the underlying assumptions of a constructivist theoretical perspective guided my inquiry.

Researcher Personal Stance

Prior to beginning this study, I had experiences that could influence my perspective of written expression instruction and assessment. In order to begin to

understand the phenomenological experiences of the participants, I must be able to set aside my own personal experiences with the phenomenon that I am exploring (Creswell, 2013).

Through my research experiences with written expression, I began to include a wider range of activities in to my understanding of the writing process. I believe that a child's oral language is related to the development of writing skills. Some children struggle to physically write information on paper, although they have many well developed ideas. Because of this difficulty in physically writing information, I believe that a child's written expression skills should not be limited by physical capabilities of writing. In addition, I believe that drawing can be an important component to a written expression task, especially for very early writers, such as the age groups included in this study. This task also allows children to communicate more information than they may be able to actually write in words. My experiences in researching early elementary school written expression has influences how I view the writing tasks that should be included in lessons by teachers.

To ensure that my opinions did not impact the nature of the interviews or the data analysis procedures I was careful to avoid leading questions, to not respond verbally or non-verbally to participants in a manner that might indicate rejection or approval, and to interpret the data at face value.

Participants and Setting

The participants in this study consisted of seven kindergarten through second grade teachers (two kindergarten, three first grade, two second grade) from a small, rural school district on the Eastern Plains of Colorado. All teachers taught in the same

elementary school with the pseudonym North Elementary School. Criterion sampling (Creswell, 2012) was used in this study because the participants were all targeted to participate because they have each experienced the same phenomenon. The selection criteria included having taught using the current methods for at least two years, having taught one year in the current school, and instructing a public school general education classroom between kindergarten and second grade. These criteria were selected to ensure that the participants had indeed experienced the same phenomenon. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym and all references to participants will be by pseudonym. Carol and Elizabeth are kindergarten teachers. Anne, Betty, and Gabby are first grade teachers. Fiona and Diane are second grade teachers. All interviews took place in the participant's classrooms and were audio recorded. All observations were video recorded during regular education written expression lessons.

The participants ranged in age from mid-twenties to mid-fifties and in years of teaching experience from 2 to 16 years, with an average of 7 years of experience. One of the teachers had earned a master's degree in a literacy related field, while all others held bachelor's degrees in elementary education or early childhood education.

Two kindergarten teachers participated in this study, Carol and Elizabeth. Carol indicated that the target skill for the end of kindergarten is for each student to be able to write two complete sentences independently. Carol was a veteran teacher who taught at the school for the past 9 years. She first taught third grade at a neighboring school district for 5 years. Carol was Hispanic and a Spanish speaker; however, she was not heard using Spanish in the classroom with any of her students. She shared that she does not personally enjoy writing and she shared that thinks her students "mirror" her dislike for

writing. Carol indicated that her current students are less enthusiastic about writing and complete the requirements for writing, but do not “push themselves” to be better writers.

Elizabeth’s classroom was next door to Carol’s. Elizabeth was the newest teacher in the study and the only teacher to share that she did not collaborate with other teachers in the school. Elizabeth was also Hispanic, but she did not discuss her Spanish language skills. Elizabeth had worked at this school for one year. Although Elizabeth appeared to be unhappy with her current employment, she shared that she enjoyed writing personally and enjoyed instructing writing.

Anne, Betty, and Gabby were first grade teachers and all were Caucasian. The expectation for students at the end of first grade was to be able to write a five sentence paragraph. Anne was also a new teacher, although slightly more experienced than Elizabeth. She had taught for three years, all in first grade and all in the same school. Anne stated that she personally enjoyed writing, especially when she was in high school. During the classroom observation she laughed and joked with her students. When discussing writing instruction, Anne indicated that she lacked confidence.

Betty had been teaching for 16 years, all in the same school. She began her teaching career as a Title 1 teacher for two years, and this position included reading and math support for kindergarten through second grade students. Next, Betty taught second grade for two years. For the prior 12 years she taught first grade. Betty appeared to be confident in her instruction of writing. Although she was the most experienced of the first grade teachers, she indicated that she improved her own lessons by collaborating with the other first grade teachers.

Gabby was the only participant with a master's degree, which she had earned recently. Her master's degree was in a literacy related field. Gabby was also the only teacher to begin her career as an educator later in adulthood, after raising her children. Gabby described herself as a "late bloomer". Gabby had only taught at this school in her career and had been teaching for 7 years. Anne, Betty, and Gabby did not typically have assistance in their classrooms by paraprofessionals or volunteers.

Diane and Fiona were the two second grade teachers. Fiona stated that second grade students are expected to expand their sentences by creating compound sentences and increasing the level of description. Diane taught for one year in preschool and two years in second grade, which had all been at North Elementary School. She typically had a parent volunteer in her classroom during her writing lessons. Diane was Caucasian and she was a soft spoken teacher. Diane indicated that she had not received very much instruction in her teacher training program regarding writing instruction.

Fiona had been teaching for 16 years, all in North Elementary School. She taught Title 1, kindergarten, first grade, and second grade. Fiona taught second grade for about 7 years, although not consecutively. Generally, Fiona did not have a paraprofessional or volunteer in her classroom during instructional periods. Fiona was animated and confident during the interviews and classroom observation. She expressed strong opinions about written expression instruction and was direct with her instructions to her students. Fiona was Hispanic and a Spanish speaker. She was not heard using Spanish with her students, but similar to Carol and Elizabeth, many of her students were also Hispanic.

The community North Elementary School is located in has a population of less than 5,000 residents. Additionally, the town has a median household income of less than half of the Colorado state average (www.city-data.com, 2014). Regarding the kindergarten through second grade students, 76.6% are Hispanic and 21.7% are white or Caucasian (Colorado Department of Education, 2015). Nearly 87% of students in NES qualify for free or reduced lunch (Colorado Department of Education, 2015). According to the Colorado Department of Education, 6.7% of students in the school district which NES is part of were English Language Learners during the 2014-2015 school year.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the participants individually in person. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed me to begin the interview with questions and alter or add to the questions at any time during the interview in order to ensure that the necessary information was gathered from each participant. Additionally, this type of interview provided minimal structure to the interviews, which enabled me to feel confident that participants were providing information on the important subject areas, but also allowed for flexibility to alter the questions based on the unique aspect of each interviewee.

Each interview lasted between 25 and 45 minutes and each participant completed two interviews. The pre-observation interview was conducted prior to the observation to gather background information on the participant, information on beliefs regarding written expression, and information about the planned lesson to be observed later. The post-observation interview was conducted after the observation and the primary focus was to discuss the lesson that had been observed. The purpose of the observation was to

make comparisons between the participant's intended lesson and the carried out lesson. This also allowed for discussion of deviations from the intended lesson. During both interviews, participants answered questions about their classroom instructional practices, specifically during written expression lessons.

Analysis of Data

All interviews were digitally recorded and the data were analyzed after full transcription was completed. This allowed me to code the data and determine common themes found from responses by all participants, as well as determine the unique information provided by each participant. Additionally, during the interviews, I took notes regarding each participant's unique non-verbal behaviors. Any relevant information from each interview was used to improve subsequent interviews. Furthermore, immediately following each interview I took notes to indicate any aspects of the interview that were particularly unique or interesting.

Trustworthiness

Multiple methods were used to ensure trustworthiness of the data while conducting this study. The credibility of the data increased through use of reflexivity by examining my personal stance on the subject matter and examining my perspective of the interview process by creating a researcher journal. I improved the dependability of the study by examining multiple sources of data, multiple participants, and creating an audit trail of the data to demonstrate the determination of codes and themes. In addition, I explained my researcher stance and bracketed my perspectives, which also served to increase the dependability of the data. Conducting a member check also served to improve the dependability of the data. The transferability of the data were improved by

providing rich, thick descriptions of the data, the participants, and the setting. This assists future researchers in determining appropriate populations that this data can be related to, although the data cannot be generalized because it is qualitative. The trustworthiness of this data has been improved by each of these methods.

Findings

The primary purpose of this study was to examine teachers' perspectives of their experiences instructing writing and to better understand their instructional decision making processes regarding writing. By examining the transcripts, notes from interviews, observation data, artifacts, and codes formed from the responses to these questions provided by participants, four major themes emerged as commonalities among the seven participants. These themes include: (1) I am guided by a system, (2) Trial and error, (3) First, we plan, and (4) I make adjustments as I go. First, we plan has two accompanying subthemes, (3a) We work together and (3b) Using the five senses. In addition, Making adjustments as I go includes three subthemes, which are (4a) Managing it all, (4b) Teaching them to do it on their own, and (4c) Taking cues from students. Each of these themes explains various circumstances that impact the thought processes used by teachers when selecting the content and strategies to be used during written expression lessons.

I am guided by a system

Themes 1 and 2 describe the underlying foundational decision making systems that the participants developed throughout their teacher training program and experience working as educators. Participants reported two primary foundational systems that guide the instructional decision making process. The first of these two systems include structured programs or trainings that have contributed to the process. The second

common system used to make instructional decisions was learning from personal experience or the experience of colleagues.

The two primary structured decision making systems that participants reported using to guide instructional decision making were Writing Alive and the Common Core standards (http://www.corestandards.org/, 2015; http://www.writingalive.com/, 2013). These systems guided teachers both in *how* to teach written expression, as well as *what* to teach during written expression lessons. Although the Writing Alive curriculum is no longer exclusively used by the school, many teachers continued to incorporate elements of it in to their teaching because they had received training in it and had experienced its effectiveness. The Common Core standards are primarily considered to guide instructional decision making for the participants in regard to *what* is taught during written expression. The participants indicated that they follow the Common Core to ensure that the necessary information to be taught at each grade level is addressed. Combining the Writing Alive and Common Core elements in to instruction was common practice with the participants.

The two primary decision structured decision making systems that participants reported using to guide instructional decision making were Writing Alive curriculum and the Common Core standards. These systems guided teachers both in *how* to teach written expression, as well as *what* to teach during written expression lessons. Fiona described her experience with training to use the Writing Alive curriculum, several years prior:

> A lady would come once or twice a month…and teach us different parts of the program. It's a huge program, it's a big binder. And she'd go through the whole Writing Alive sentence piece by piece. So we would learn a little piece, talk about it. Train on it. Practice it on the class. She would demonstrate with the class what it should look like.

Some participants also reported that they had received training in instructing writing through in-service presentations or with a writing coach provided by the school district. In addition, most reported that they did not have any training in written expression instruction while in their teacher training programs. Gabby stated that she was trained in written expression instruction during her graduate training program, which was in a literacy related field, but not trained during her undergraduate training in elementary education.

Using a structured system to guide the decision making process in instructing written expression provides an outline for teachers that comes with support to indicate it is likely to be successful. When teachers do not have the ability to use a system to guide them in instructing written expression, the alternative decision making process may not have any empirical support to indicate that it will lead to student success.

Trial and error

While some teachers had formalized, systematic instruction in teaching written expression, all teachers valued the personal experiences they had to develop belief systems about writing. All participants reported that they have, at least in part, learned to instruct written expression through trial and error. Primarily, teachers stated that they learned from their own experiences, and to a lesser degree, from the experiences of colleagues. One of the reasons that teachers reported learning from their own experience or experiences of colleagues is that they lack formal training in written expression instruction. Teachers reported that in the early years as educators, they struggled to instruct writing and become more comfortable instructing written expression over time.

Primarily, teachers stated that they learned from their own experiences, and to a lesser degree, from the experiences of colleagues. One of the reasons that teachers reported learning from their own experience or experiences of colleagues is that they lack formal training in written expression instruction. Anne reported, "I don't really feel like I had much preparation in college as far as actual, applicable skills. It was theory and classroom management and techniques." Carol stated, "So lots of times I'll just think about 'well, when I did this before, what worked before?'" This statement indicated that she relied on her past experiences with various lessons to improve or adapt lessons to the current class of students.

Although Diane only taught for a few years, she indicated that her teaching practice had improved over time. Additionally, she believed that she learned from her own experience teaching and used her past teaching experiences to inform her future practice.

> Diane: I've taught a lot better this year, probably because of my experience. My first year, not giving myself enough time to be able to teach it and then I felt like I was rushing through it and I didn't explain it as well and give the clear expectations. So then classroom management fell apart, everything else fell apart. It was awful. And that pretty much sums up, I don't think the classroom management was horrible, but it could have been a lot better if I would have gave clearer expectations and if I knew where I was going. This year I kind of know my own expectations as a teacher and I know the standards that are there, so it's a lot better this year.

Teachers reported that they improve lessons from year to year, which primarily includes using the same lesson structure, but changing the activities in the lesson to match the current class of children. Participants who have taught for several years are able to draw on their own experiences to improve their own practice, but teachers who

are lacking experience reported depending more on the experience of colleagues to make instructional decisions.

First, we plan

We work together. The instructional decision making thought process of the participants was influenced by collaboration by colleagues. When making instructional decisions to plan future lessons, most participants valued the input of colleagues. Anne stated, "….all the training that I've gotten has just been kind of what [same grade level teacher] has told me to do." Six out of the seven participants described collaboration with colleagues as an important aspect of teaching writing. Diane took a proactive approach to learning from her colleagues and said, "I didn't have too much training in writing, kind of led by basically examples from my coworkers here. I would go and observe them and bring what I had observed in to my own teaching." Additionally, when making instructional decisions about written expression lessons, teachers reportedly valued peer learning for students in the same way they value peer learning for themselves. The majority of the participants emphasized the importance of students learning through peer activities, such as peer editing.

When making instructional decisions to plan future lessons, most participants valued the input of colleagues. Six out of the seven participants described collaboration with colleagues as an important aspect of teaching writing and reported doing this on a consistent basis. Additionally, when making instructional decisions about written expression lessons, teachers indicated valuing peer learning for students in the same way that they value peer learning for themselves. The majority of the participants also

emphasized the importance of students learning through peer activities, such as peer editing.

In addition to the consistent collaborative planning among teachers, participants also reported reaching out to others when they needed assistance with a particularly challenging lesson or with a new lesson that students struggled to comprehend. Participants also described sharing successful lessons that they have experienced. Carol described how she shares with other teachers when they experience both challenges and successes.

> Carol: I know we do [seek support from colleagues when struggling]. And maybe not necessarily when we're always stuck but…we also share really good lessons, if I do something that came out really good, I'll go and tell them about it and if they need something later. But, definitely, if we're struggling or if we need help or need an idea, we definitely collaborate.

Using the five senses. Participants reported using multi-sensory activities in the instructional decision making process. This was described during interviews, observed during classroom lessons, and shared when looking at artifacts. The primary reason reported for using multi-sensory activities was to increase the likelihood that students would be able to gain an understanding of the material presented by teaching information in multiple ways.

Several years prior, the school where the data were collected used the Writing Alive curriculum exclusively. At the time of data collection, teachers chose how much of this curriculum to continue including in lessons. The Writing Alive curriculum includes multi-sensory cues in learning the writing process, such as tactile, visual, taste, and verbal cues. Different shapes and colors correspond to each part of speech. Green rectangles are subjects, purple triangles are verbs, red "watermelon slices" are objects, and pink clouds

are prepositional phrases (see Image 1). Most classrooms had posters on the walls depicting these parts of speech and the graphic organizers included the same shape usage. Additionally, many teachers were observed using small, colored, laminated shapes with these parts of speech to assist individuals or small groups of students who required step-by-step support in completing graphic organizers. The prior inclusion of the Writing Alive curriculum impacted the instructional decision making process of many teachers, because they were trained in this program, or had been mentored by other teachers who were trained in this program. Carol described using a multi-sensory approach to increasing her students' understanding of verbs by stating,

> And I think it's just because it's just an action lesson and because it's such, the actions that go with verbs are just fun. So, we also, at the beginning of the year, so like for green apple, we pull out green apple candy. For the verbs we bring purple grapes. And so they get to taste but then we also get up and move and talk about what a verb is.

For some teachers like Carol, training had previously occurred in a multi-sensory approach to teaching written expression. Instructional decisions appeared to be impacted in part by multi-sensory activities because teachers had previously included them in lessons and are comfortable with them. In addition, participants shared a belief that students would learn from multi-sensory activities during written expression and benefit from learning through using a variety of activities.

Making adjustments as I go

Although most of the participants enjoyed collaboration with colleagues to prepare lessons in advance, as is typical in elementary school classrooms, adjustments were also frequently made during instruction. Teachers' thought processes for instruction were often impacted by unpredictability in the classroom. Anne described a recent lesson

she had given that was very unpredictable. She had only three days in the week to organize her lesson, compared to the typical five. In addition, Anne did not anticipate the challenges that her students would experience. She expected that they would be able to complete the task independently, but they could not. In response, Anne had to change her thought process regarding the lesson to ensure that her students were able to understand the material.

Managing it all

Throughout all interviews, participants discussed the demands placed on them in the general education classroom environment which contribute to instructional decision making for written expression. Two factors significantly contributing to the choices made by teachers, which are time constraints and student engagement. To explain the challenge in managing student behavior, Diane said,

> I think what really threw the lesson off was that one child that was supposed to have the one-on-one aid, and the one-on-one aid was pulled to go cover pre-school, so she wasn't able to help during that time, and then the parent(classroom volunteer) is usually more active here during that time.

During the classroom observation, Diane was observed struggling with the student she describes above. In her lesson, students were completing different tasks as part of a large writing project. Diane shared that she was unsure of the part of the project each student was supposed to be completing and the next day, she had each student tell her this information prior to beginning independent work. This allowed her to be better aware of students on or off task behavior.

The first contributing factor, time constraints, included concerns such as meeting all necessary standards from the Common Core Standards within the school year and

managing school-wide schedules and schedule changes. Teachers reported more pressure on them to ensure that all necessary aspects of the Common Core Standards were met because there was no school wide curriculum, leaving more discretion to teachers to determine what information should be taught and when it should be taught.

Teachers reported that many students struggle to be engaged during written expression activities and that some students display inappropriate behavior at this time. Participants hypothesized that these behaviors occurred when students did not connect to the material presented personally or did not understand how to do the activities. Many teachers reported that written expression is generally a difficult subject for children to understand, differentiating it from other subjects. Some teachers stated that they have classroom support by either a paraprofessional or a parent volunteer to assist with monitoring student behavior, while others did not have assistance. Managing student behavior created challenges for teachers to ensure that all students were staying on task and completing work. When teachers are relying on cues from student behavior to determine if students comprehend the information and they are not putting forth effort, following student cues is not useful.

Teaching them to do it on their own

The desire to increase student independence guides teacher decision making processes when planning lessons and when making decisions during written expression lessons. Participants described the need for students to become independent writers and the process for increasing students' abilities to become independent. Betty said, "We need to start weaning them from just all doing it together." For example, Carol taught students to use a checklist to monitor their own writing to determine if they had

completed all necessary steps in the writing process. This would allow students to check their own work prior to asking her to check their work and prepare students for more challenging writing activities in subsequent grades. Carol described this stating, “So, it’s another tool to move them into independence that they’re going to need when they get to first grade”.

By teaching students to become independent writers, the participants indicated that they can focus their attention on meeting the needs of students who are struggling and on creating increasing challenges for students who are successful writers. Increasing independence also creates a challenge for students who are prepared to try different types of tasks during written expression lessons.

Other participants described the use of graphic organizers for students to learn to structure their own writing. Throughout the interviews, teachers used various terms to describe these organizers, such as a ‘camera’. By teaching the students to use a graphic organizer, students were then able to understand the writing process and build skills to independently use the writing process in the future for a variety of tasks. Diane stated that by teaching students to use the graphic organizer now for short writing activities, they will be able to apply the same principles to larger term papers in high school.

Taking cues from students

As students become more proficient writers, teachers reported that this shows that the students are mastering skills. One indicator that participants reported using when creating or changing lesson plans was cues from students. Student cues included various behaviors, such as crying, asking questions, completing tasks independently, being off task, and acting out. Through these behaviors, participants reported making decisions

regarding moving on to new lessons, re-teaching lessons, or changing a lesson format (ex.: from whole class instruction to small group or individual instruction).

Regarding using student behavior to guide instructional decisions, Betty stated, "Well, one of them was in tears. Lots of, "I don't know! I don't know!" Lots of yelling out. Just body language. I lost the group." Betty then used this information to determine that she needed to re-teach part of the lesson in order for the majority of students to be able to understand the concept. Anne similarly shared:

> Well, other than my kids that were just sitting there crying… just a lot of questions, which is fine…but I mean….twenty-four kids that needed me to work one on one with them. And so it was very obvious… and they couldn't even do like the first step by themselves.

Observing these cues provided by students to indicate frustration and a lack of ability, Anne changed her thought process towards the instruction she was providing to students. She then re-taught information that the class had already been presented with.

Fiona discussed the need for understanding her class of students to be able to read the cues they provided. This allowed her to recognize what each student's behavior meant. To describe this she stated, *"You absorb everything that's going on in here. It's in you."* Fiona was describing the importance of understanding her students and their behavior. To her, this has become a natural process. Fiona was aware of her students' writing skills without looking back at recent work. She also has an understanding of which students should be challenged to write more or write with more complexity. This allows her to meet a variety of student needs within her lessons, altering the expectations for low, average and high achievers. Fiona is also able to continue to attend to the needs of her students and the cues provided by them without losing her focus on the content of the writing lesson. During the observation of Fiona, she was observed to alter her

feedback to each student based on the needs of the student. During the post-observation interview, she described how she anticipated the products each student would create and the level of feedback they would need.

Discussion

Throughout this study, participants described making instructional decisions regarding written expression based on a variety of different factors. Personal experience, experience of others, influence of the Common Core state standards, and the classroom environment all contributed to teacher's decision making processes regarding written expression. Participants reported that they took cues from student work, student behavior, informally monitored student progress during instruction, and listened to students' communication with classmates during lessons. Penner-Williams, Smith, and Gartin (2009) stated that, "Because of its complexity, the assessment of written language is difficult and, at times, highly subjective (p.163)", which may explain some of the difficulty teachers described in making instructional decisions regarding writing. These authors further state, "…its informal nature often results in teachers not effectively using the information obtained". This may account in part for the challenges faced by the participants in having confidence when making instructional decisions using available, informal data collection methods and when making decisions spontaneously during lessons, specifically when students experienced unexpected challenges.

Coker and Ritchey (2010) describe the challenges that teachers may experience when scoring informal data collection procedures because a variety of scoring procedures can be used when evaluating sentences, and scoring procedures are often more complicated than either correct or incorrect responses. Students can respond to writing

prompts in very different ways that can both be correct. For example, Anne, Betty and Gabby all asked their students to write about a cool job and students can choose very different vocabulary, while still providing correct answers (ex: cop or police officer). The teacher must then consider which aspects of the response to grade, which aspects to inform future instructional decisions, what deficits need to be addressed with the whole class, and which students need additional support individually. Written expression tasks require visual-spatial skills and fine and gross motor development, in addition to conceptual and skill based knowledge (Penner-Williams et al.,, 2009). When informal assessments in addition to a variety of other classroom factors are informing instructional decision making in writing, teacher confidence can be reduced and instruction may not be empirically supported.

One of the important findings is that many teachers do not feel prepared to instruct written expression upon completion of teacher training program, indicating that they may require additional support from administrators and colleagues when they begin classroom instruction. Gilbert and Graham (2011) also reported a similar finding, stating that many teachers self-report that they are lacking training in written expression instruction. This should suggest to administrators that they may need to invest in in-service training programs for teachers and should also indicate to faculty in teacher training programs that increased emphasis should be placed on written expression instruction during training to improve teaching practice and to improve the marketability of future teachers. These findings are important for all stakeholders in improving student written expression skills, including those instructing students at higher grade levels because students may not be learning the necessary foundational skills for written

expression in the early grades to be successful without additional supports later in their educational careers. The information then raises the question of how new teachers, with little to no experience, will develop a successful teaching practice when they are unable to rely on their own experience and do not come in to the field with formal training.

In addition to varying levels of pre-service preparation, the participants in this study indicated that they had varying levels of training on instructing written expression once they became teachers. Teachers may have attended different trainings from one another at different times, or began their teaching careers with different degrees of knowledge. Each teacher was then expected to be able to instruct her class on the same grade level skills, even though teacher skill levels are inconsistent. This could lead to reliance on collaboration from colleagues to share the necessary information, rather than reliance on training. The knowledge about the training is then not received from the original source, creating an increased possibility that communication errors could take place and information could be misinterpreted or poorly instructed. Administrators should consider the support provided to teachers during trainings and may choose to increase the number of teachers attending such trainings or the variety of trainings attended by school personnel.

In this study, nearly all participants experienced frequent collaboration with same and similar grade level colleagues. Hindin, Morocco, Mott, & Aguilar (2007) have discussed the roles that different teachers take when planning collaboratively. These authors indicate that more “expert” teachers often do not share as much of their relevant knowledge as they could when in collaborative work and that personality characteristics contribute to the amount of information shared by participants. Many barriers can exist to

teachers collaborating with one another. Lawson (2004) indicates that while individuals can choose to work collaboratively, they still work within the confines of an organization, such as a school, and must follow the structure initiated by that entity. For example, some schools may not share the culture of this school. Teachers working collaboratively have the opportunity to reflect on their own teaching practices and improve their own practices (Gitlin, 1999). The teachers in this study demonstrated how collaborative instructional planning can be done effectively.

The participants in this study heavily relied on the Common Core standards to assist them in planning lessons, as a guide when collaborating with colleagues, and as a system for understanding written expression. The Common Core standards provides a "roadmap for writing instruction" (Graham & Harris, 2013). The Colorado Department of Education adopted the Common Core standards in August of 2010, with supplemental requirements unique to the state (Colorado Department of Education, n.d.). Graham and Harris (2013) report that written expression instruction has changed significantly since the Common Core was instituted, which was also accompanied by significant efforts to alter the instruction of written expression.

The implementation of the Common Core standards has garnered many opinions and VanTassel-Baska (2015) identified several arguments for and against its use. She states that it has led to expectation of higher level tasks and expectations for students. Additionally, VanTassel-Baska also reports that an argument against the use of the Common Core is that teachers lack the training to effectively translate the standards in to curricular objectives or lessons. effectively. The participants in this study indicated that they had not been well trained in instructing written expression. Many of the teachers

began teaching several years before the Common Core was adopted, indicating that they would require continuing education on this topic to be up to date on the expectations outlined by the standards.

Limitations

In addition to the strengths of this study, limitations are also present. Including nearly all of the kindergarten through second grade teachers in one school can be viewed as a strength because the influence of school culture can be better accounted for; this also limits the generalizability of the data because it has not come from multiple sites. One of the other weaknesses of this study is that the data were all collected at the same period in the school year. While this allowed the teachers to reflect on similar experiences at the same period within the same school year, it also may have led many of the participants to reflect only on the recent experiences, rather than a wider variety of experiences throughout the school year. Because of these limitations and the nature of qualitative research, the findings of this study must be considered in the context of the participants, rather than as data that is generalizable to a wide population.

One characteristic of the data collection in this study is the nature of the face-to-face interview style. Some participants may have shared limited information regarding their own experiences in this format, and may have been more open to sharing information through a survey methodology. By including a classroom observation, and I can increase the likelihood that the descriptions participants gave of their experiences instructing written expression are accurate; however, only one observation was conducted in each classroom.

Future Research

One of the limitations to the current study is that all the data were gathered from one small school, which limits the range of settings the data could be generalized to. To improve this research in the future, similar data could be gathered from multiple schools. This would improve the trustworthiness of the data and increase the likelihood that the data is valid. In addition, there may be some of the demographic characteristics of the school examined in this study likely contributed to the teacher practices of the participants. A school with demographic characteristics more similar to that of the state of Colorado may yield different results. The generalizability of the data gathered in this study is limited due to the qualitative nature of the study, but also by the unique characteristics of the population sampled. that limit the variety of perspectives that could be found through interviews and observations.

Another additional area for future research would include exploring the experiences of additional school based professionals. First, teachers in upper elementary school grades could be interviewed to gain perspectives on increasingly advanced written expression tasks. Through the current research study, I was able to understand the continuity that could be created when continuous grade level teachers communicate and collaborate with one another. By adding a wider range of grade level teachers to the research, I would be able to better understand the continuity that can be created in a school to ensure consistency for students throughout their elementary school years. Similarly, it could be beneficial to include all teachers in a single school at all grade levels using the same model used in this study. This would allow for consistency in the methods and curriculum used at the school, while also allowing the researcher to explore

the continuity throughout one entire school building. Examining the perspectives and involvement of the administration of the same school would also add to the richness of the data collected and add a systemic perspective to the data.

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APPENDIX I

IRB APPROVAL

UNIVERSITY of
NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

DATE:	February 26, 2014
TO:	Lisa Little
FROM:	University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB
PROJECT TITLE:	[564532-2] Instructional Practices in Early Elementary School Written Expression: Teacher Beliefs, Instructional Strategies and Decision Making
SUBMISSION TYPE:	Amendment/Modification
ACTION:	APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE:	February 25, 2014
EXPIRATION DATE:	February 25, 2015
REVIEW TYPE:	Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB has APPROVED your submission. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of February 25, 2015.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Sherry May at 970-351-1910 or Sherry.May@unco.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB's records.

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APPENDIX J

AUDIT TRAIL

	Corresponding Codes				
Themes					
I am guided by a system	Using explicit target	Follow Common Core	Include Writing Alive	No set curriculum	Variability in training
Trial and error	Varying years of experience	Not trained	Teaching experiences	Colleague experience	Building personal skills
	Teacher practice				
First, we plan	Collaborative planning	Colleagues share lessons	Consult after lessons	Receiving colleague support	Peer learning
	Verbal cues	Including visuals			
I make adjustments as I go	Unpredictability during lesson	Knowledge of students	Behavior management	Seeking classroom support	Explicit instruction
	Individualized needs	Teaching independence	Increasing skills	Using non-verbals	